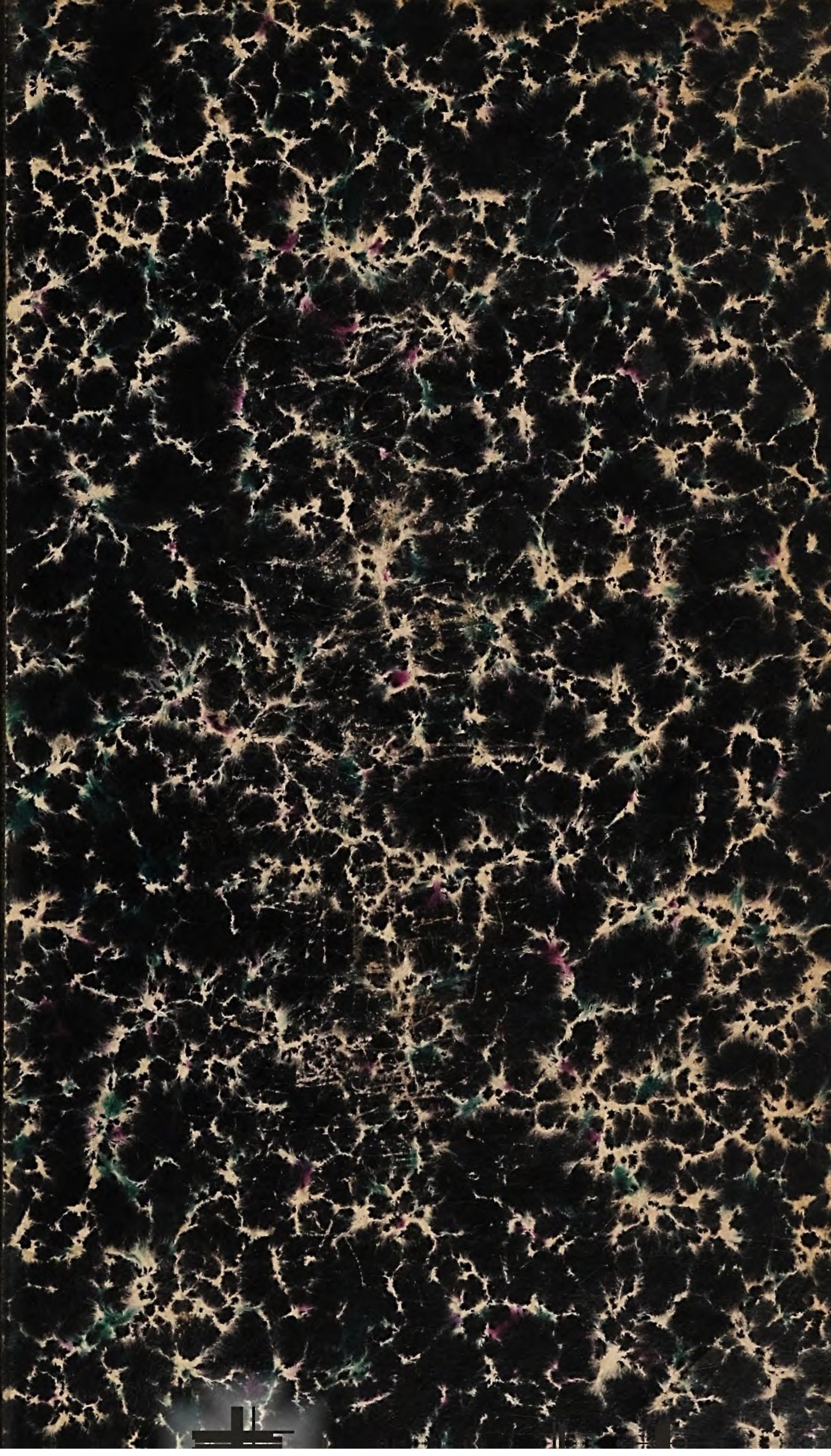


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VOL. 3163.

THE LUCKIEST OF THREE, ETC.

BY

F. C. PHILIPS.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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1896.

THE
RIGHT OF TRUTH
AND TRUTH



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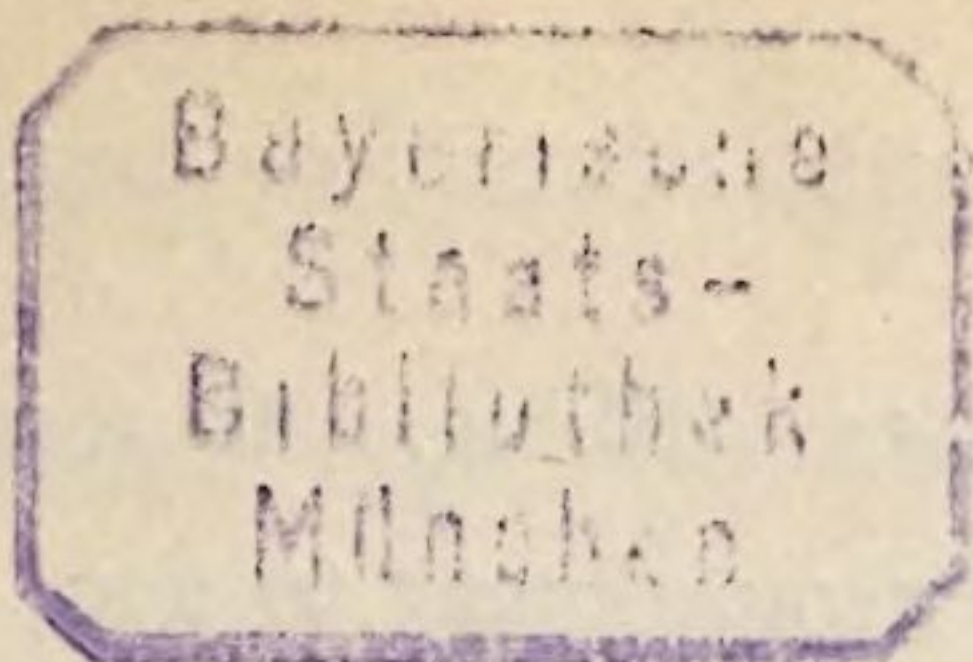
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THE LUCKIEST OF THREE.

THE LUCKY OF THREE



THE LUCKIEST OF THREE.

CHAPTER I.

HER name was Felicia. How I came to meet Felicia, and the part she has played in my life is the story I have to tell. It is an odd story, a startling story, and my life hitherto had been neither startling nor eventful; on the contrary, I had lived in the quietest way possible, partly because I had not lived a great many years at all—partly because my tastes lay in that direction—chiefly because, as a humble professor of music, my means permitted of nothing else. Let me go back to the evening—the evening of October 3rd, 1889—when I saw her first, and, believe me, I

shall exaggerate nothing. If something appears improbable, extraordinary to you, remember that it happened—that this is an unvarnished chronicle of facts, remarkable, if you like, deplorable even, but facts.

The evening of October 3rd, 1889,—nine o'clock; the scene, the First-class Waiting Room at Charing Cross Station. Nothing melodramatic in the externals, you perceive. Without, a slight rain falling; within, two old ladies, a gentleman with a little boy, and myself. The two old ladies conversed together in murmurs, the murmurs one hears in a fashionable Church before the Choir enters; the gentleman consulted a time-table, the boy shuffled his feet impatiently. I—ætat 25—who was not going by train, but awaited my friend Sigismund Frith here, looked an irritated protest—musicians are nervous; I am no exception to the rule. At this moment the door on my left opened, and a girl of perhaps my own age came into our midst.

Shall I describe her? I will try, but I shall fail. She had brown eyes—does that tell you anything? Nothing at all! Her eyes were glorious, marvellous; they looked like liquid fire. Her lips were scarlet, her face was very pale. She wore something that became her; her hat was small. I might amplify details for ever without giving you an idea of how she looked—it is hopeless. Let me say instead that her personality was striking—the most striking I had ever seen, and that the gentleman ceased to consult his timetable, and the old ladies suspended their murmurs, and that I—well, that I, I fear, gazed at her too long to be polite, when she entered, and took her seat amongst us.

She did not read; she sat with her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed upon the opposite wall, and I wished I were Sigismund Frith, who was an artist, that I might have endeavoured, unnoticed, to make a sketch of her. It is, perhaps, absurd, and it gives, I am afraid, an

erroneous impression of me at the outset, when I say that she attracted me so curiously, that I was perfectly happy in my enforced inactivity, because I could watch her—more than that, when my friend arrived, I made an excuse to stay here, reluctant to take myself out of her presence.

Of course he remarked her too.

“What a beautiful girl!” he muttered.

“Isn’t she!” I answered, devouring her in a glance. “And, well,” it was necessary to say something, “did you enjoy your holiday?”

“Yes,” he declared, “I’ve had a fairly good time. Are you still in the same ‘digs,’ old chap? We might move on there, and have a smoke, if you’ve nothing to do.”

I felt myself a fool, and yet I could not go.

“Wait a little,” I said, “I’m tired—I’ve done a lot of walking this afternoon.”

“More pupils?”

“No, I’ve been tramping around among the

publishers with one or two little songs I've turned out since you've been away."

The other occupants of the waiting-room had departed while we talked, and now only we and the girl remained. I had been conscious during the last few minutes that she had been covertly regarding me, and the next moment with some indecision, she rose, and came across to where we sat.

"I—I should like to speak to you for a moment," she said in a low voice, to my unutterable stupefaction.

I sprang to my feet, and followed her to the fireplace. What did it mean? What was coming?

She leant an arm on the mantelpiece, and contemplated my face for an instant without continuing. When she did continue, another shock befell me.

"I have no home," she said, "I am in London

all by myself. You look kind, you look generous—will you take pity on me?”

Amazement held me dumb. I knew intuitively that Sigismund was staring in our direction with curiosity, but I would not turn.

“Will you take pity on me?” she repeated, her wonderful eyes upturned.

“I will do anything I can for you,” I said earnestly. “What—what do you want?”

“Send away your friend,” she murmured; “I shall talk better if I’m not so ashamed.”

I returned to the sofa. Sigismund greeted me with uplifted brows and a smile.

“I—she wants to talk to me,” I said. “Do you mind —?”

“Oh, not at all,” he responded, laughing, “I congratulate you. Look me up to-morrow, will you? I shall be interested.”

“You are quite mistaken in supposing there is any matter for congratulations,” I protested;

"the lady hasn't fallen in love with me, I assure you. Good night."

"Good night, old chap," said Sigismund. "I think I shall go to a Music hall. I shall be in all the morning."

He disappeared, and the strange girl and I were alone.

"Thank you," she said. "What must you think of me!"

"Shall we sit down?" I asked, "or would you rather—"

"I would rather stand," she replied.

I was decidedly embarrassed.

"Do you mind explaining," I begged, "what you meant by the words you just used? It is—it is almost impossible to realise that you are in such straits as you suggest."

"I am quite penniless," she said, "quite, quite. Literally I have no money at all, and when I leave the station, I have nowhere to go. I came here to-night—,"

"You came here to-night?" I repeated as she stopped short.

"I came here to-night to take one of two courses. The one I have taken you know—I have asked a stranger to befriend me."

"And the other," I questioned, as she hesitated once more. "And the other, what was that?"

"The other was to throw myself under a train."

"Good God," I exclaimed, "your condition is so desperate that you could meditate—?"

"If you had not been here, I should have done it by now! Your face gave me the hope that you would aid me, that you would not abuse my helplessness. I felt I could trust you! Was it only cowardice—was it only that I was afraid to die?"

"I hope not," I returned, "I hope you may trust me implicitly. At the same time, it is only fair to tell you that my own position prevents me doing you any permanent good. What I *can* do, I will do gladly."

"What is that?" she asked bluntly.

"Well—er—if a small loan—?"

"I am hungry," she said; "will you give me something to eat?"

For answer I picked up my hat, and led the way out into the street.

"Better take my arm," I suggested, as we reached the crowd and jostle of the Strand. "Are you a stranger in London?"

"I was not born here," she replied. "You are being very kind to me."

"Oh, don't say anything about that," I said, constrainedly. "Let us go in here."

We passed into a large restaurant, bright with plate glass and the glitter of gas, where everybody turned to look at my companion with admiration, and, taking our seats at a little table sufficiently isolated to afford us a chance of conversing without being overheard, I handed this extraordinary recipient of my charity the *menu*.

She was not oppressed by the pseudo-luxury

of a Strand restaurant, that was evident, nor did her attractions suffer from any undue bashfulness. For myself, a struggling professional man with a small and somewhat precarious income, I must confess that the little supper we indulged in that night was an almost unparalleled extravagance; but I could not demur, even when, in reply to my perfunctory inquiry if she drank wine, she answered that she liked champagne.

We had the champagne, and we had two little cups of coffee, and liqueurs afterwards, and by degrees I abandoned myself to the pleasure of the odd *tête-à-tête* without reflection.

She was astonishingly beautiful, and she had a charm of manner so singular that it overcame the restraint which the nature of the situation might have very naturally imposed. So far from dwelling upon the unconventionality of the occasion, however, she seemed in intervals to actually forget it, and if we had known each other for weeks, nay months, the conversation could hardly

have been gayer and more unstrained than that with which my companion favoured me until a chance word recalled her plight and appeal momentarily to her mind.

This could not last for ever, though. It was eleven o'clock when the waiter brought me my bill, and we got leisurely up, and sauntered out into the street once more. She had talked so much, so happily, that I had had no opportunity to allude to the small gift I purposed making her, and it now devolved upon me to do so without loss of time.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as we stood on the pavement outside the doors.

"Well, I think you had better get a room," I said, "before it is too late. Have you no things—no trunk, no belongings of any kind anywhere?"

"Nothing," she answered, shaking her head, "nothing at all! I am just as you see me."

"But where have you lived, for Heaven's sake?"

You must have *some* possessions, *some* luggage?" I persisted.

"They are my landlady's possessions now; she refused to give them up when I left. No, I have absolutely nothing; do you think an hotel will take me in?"

"How much do you owe the woman?"

"Seven pounds."

I mused. Seven pounds I was not prepared to pay. Of course the luggage was detained illegally, but neither was I prepared to have an encounter at eleven o'clock at night with an abusive female on a doorstep.

"It is very awkward," I said, gloomily, "very awkward indeed."

"Don't be angry with me," she pleaded.

"I am not angry; but you must know as well as I do that I am powerless to help you any further. Look here, here is a sovereign; go back to the woman and show it to her; you can arrange something in the morning, and in the mean-

time you will have somewhere to pass the night."

"It is impossible," she averred. "I daren't present myself at that creature's house again. I daren't!"

"And where are you to sleep?" I demanded.

"I don't know," she said, hopelessly.

I began to wish I had not met her. I found myself suddenly saddled with a grave responsibility.

For two or three minutes we stood there in silence, both meditating; at least *I* meditated, and she appeared to await the result of my reflections.

"The only thing I can suggest," I said at last, "is that I go to my friend's to-night, and place my own apartments at your disposal. To-morrow we must make some other arrangement. For one thing, you must have your trunks back, and without delay."

"It is awfully, awfully kind of you!" she faltered.

“Oh, you need not take it so seriously. I shall be quite comfortable at Sigismund’s, and he will be very glad to see me. Come, we had better get into a ’bus at the corner; and—I shall introduce you to my landlady as a cousin. By the way, what is your name?”

“My name is Felicia Harding,” she said. “And yours—may I know?”

“Mine is Gerard Murray. There our ’bus goes!”

I hailed the conductor, and the next moment we were sitting side by side in the fusty interior. The distance was not a long one—my quarters were in the Bloomsbury district—and by half past eleven I stood with Miss Harding in my modest parlour.

“Make yourself at home,” I begged; “this is my sitting-room, the bedroom is behind those folding-doors. I usually breakfast at nine, but if you would prefer it later, you have only to tell Mrs.

Cox so when she calls you. I shall not intrude upon you till noon."

"And to think," she said, putting out her hand, "that I should be dead now but for you! I wonder if you know how grateful all this makes me feel!"

"It is horrible to hear you talk like that," I said; "you are so young, so—"

(She smiled; I was more confused than she.)

"I am pretty, you mean!" she added. "But I was near to being a 'demned, cold, moist unpleasant corpse' for all that. I shall never forget you, Mr. Murray, never forget all you have done for a friendless girl."

I was holding her hand all this time, and I could not resist pressing it at her last words.

"Good night," I said. "Sleep well, and forget your troubles for a while in happy dreams."

Then I went downstairs, and out to surprise Sigismund. It has been seen that the earliest result of my acquaintance with Felicia was to turn me out of doors.

CHAPTER II.

FRITH had not come in when I reached his quarters, but we knew each other too well for me to stand on any ceremony—indeed ceremony seemed curiously out of fashion that evening. I went upstairs, and, drawing my pipe and tobacco out of my pocket, made myself comfortable in an armchair until his return.

He looked a good deal astonished when he saw me; it was to be expected.

“You!” he said. “I’ve been boring myself at a music-hall all the evening, and you have been waiting here for me!”

“Hardly; I haven’t been here more than twenty minutes. As a matter of fact, I want you to put me up to-night, old chap.”

“With all the pleasure in the world, but—?”

"Oh, you may ask any questions you like. I want you to put me up because my own rooms are occupied by Miss Felicia Harding."

"The girl at Charing Cross?"

"Precisely, the girl at Charing Cross." And I recounted to him all that had happened.

He listened with curiosity and amusement.

"You seem to have cooked yourself an appetising kettle of fish!" he remarked. "And what are you going to do with her when to-morrow comes, Don Quixote; do you propose to make her an annual allowance?"

"Don't be idiotic!" I said, availing myself of an old friend's privilege to be rude. "To-morrow she will go home, of course."

"Go—?"

"Go *home*. That is to say—"

"Exactly; that is to say if she has one. I gathered that she hadn't."

"Well, she'll have to go *somewhere*, naturally,

and, equally naturally, the responsibility of selection is not mine."

I do not think I can be accused of harshness in giving expression to this view, but I am free to confess that Felicia's face came before me as I did so, and I felt a callous brute, and demanded whisky.

I did not feel any better when I awoke the following morning—possibly the whisky had not been good—but I dressed and breakfasted without reproaching myself for my hardness of heart any more, on the contrary I did my best now, after the night's reflections, to cultivate it. She was very beautiful, very charming, but there was something not altogether satisfactory about her, and I was conscious that I had rashly placed myself on the brink of a position which might prove to be very disastrous. I set out for Bloomsbury with so many good intentions that I am convinced I subsequently paved a mile of Hades Avenue at the very least.

To my surprise, on mounting the staircase, I heard Miss Harding singing in a perfectly pure and admirably-trained contralto at my piano. I paused in sheer delight, then, entering, applauded her heartily.

"Good morning," I cried; "with a voice like that your troubles should be brief!"

She welcomed the compliment more warmly than myself.

"Oh, good morning," she exclaimed, rising, "I did not expect you so early. You think my voice is good?"

"Excellent. You have slept well?"

"Thanks, I am immensely better."

She looked it. Standing there in the flood of sunshine invading the little room, she was the picture of health and loveliness. Again remorse for my meditations tightened its grip on me.

She repeated her question:

"You really like my voice?"

"I like it extremely."

"And you think—you think I might do something with it?"

"Professionally, you mean?"

"Of course, professionally—what else!"

"I certainly think you might! Of course engagements are difficult to obtain, but with your appearance——"

"That is what I have always said," she interrupted; "with my voice *and* my appearance I am sure I ought to succeed."

I bowed acquiescingly, albeit this plain allusion to her own charms disconcerted me a little.

"But perhaps," she added, as an after-thought, "you know nothing about it?"

"Music is my profession," I said; "I may claim to be something of a judge. May I ask if you have ever sung in public?"

"Never," she answered.

"Nor attempted to gain a hearing at all?"

"Oh, I have attempted that, but ineffectually. I have no influence."

"I am afraid," said I, "that I have very little myself, but what I do possess is at your service. I might give you one or two introductions that might be serviceable to you."

She was immediately and effusively grateful.

"I ought to tell you something about myself," she said. "I am quite alone in the world, and I have never had occasion until the last few weeks to attempt to earn my own living. When the necessity arose, my thoughts turned at once to the stage, and I made every effort in my power to put the idea into practice. The result you know already. Last night I was at the end of my resources, and but for you——" Her eyes dwelt on me tenderly, and again her hand found its way into my own. "But for you my ambitions and I would have died together. How I summoned up courage to address you I don't know! What did you think of me?"

"I thought you an extremely lovely lady," I replied a trifle formally perhaps.

"And what else?"

"‘What else’? Well, I thought you an equally delightful companion."

"I can be *more* delightful," she said hastily. "I was not myself last night—naturally I was humiliated, *triste*. But as a rule I am always in good spirits, I could always put *you* into good spirits, and I can be very nice to those I like. I am worth knowing, Mr. Murray."

"I haven't a doubt of it," I murmured, still retaining her hand.

She flashed a glance at me which I was unable to interpret, and then seated herself at the piano once more.

"I will sing you something properly," she said; "or—I see you have a pile of music there—play the accompaniment for me, and I shall do myself more justice."

I selected a song under her guidance, and then another, and a third. I had certainly not over-estimated her ability. Though she would

never rise to any extraordinary heights, she should, I thought, easily win for herself the position of a popular artiste on the lyric stage, presuming that she had moderate luck and a capacity for work.

"Can you act at all, Miss Harding?" I inquired anxiously.

She shook her head doubtfully; "I don't know. Is it necessary I should be an actress too? It isn't necessary for an actress that she should be able to sing."

I smiled.

"If you *can* act a little," I answered, without discussing the latter point, "it will improve your chances a great deal."

"Well, then, I must act!" she said with a shrug of her shoulders. "Can you teach me?"

"I? Oh no."

She looked disappointed, even, I fancied, a shade aggrieved. Indisputably Miss Felicia Harding expected all with whom she came in contact

to contribute their quota to her welfare! And also her confidence was probably justified, it appeared to me. For myself, I already felt considerable chagrin at being incompetent to teach her to act.

“Anyhow,” I said after a pause, “the great thing to consider now is the immediate present. Your voice simplifies the position a lot. I think I could get you into the chorus at one of the West End theatres at once. That would provide bread and butter, and even with management, bread and jam.”

I half expected a protest from her, half feared I should be told indignantly that, within touch of starvation as she was, the chorus was nevertheless an ignominy which she could not for an instant contemplate. To my surprise, she behaved almost exactly as any other girl in such straits would have done; the colour swept her face—she smiled at me radiantly.

“You angel,” she cried. “Let us go and see about it right off.”

Excepting for a superfluous warmth of expression, and a total disregard for any work of my own that I might have on hand, this was just what the other women would have answered. I felt more at home with her than I had done yet.

As it happened, I had a couple of hours I could easily spare on that day.

"Go and put on your hat," I rejoined, "and we will start."

Again she resembled the majority of her charming sex. She took twenty minutes putting on her hat, and was totally oblivious on her return that she had kept me waiting.

I had a slight acquaintance with the manager of the Galaxy Theatre, and I was aware that a new comic opera was in rehearsal there. When we reached the doors, and gained admittance to the stage, I discovered moreover that applicants for the chorus were at the moment being tried. Fortune had favoured us.

A few explanatory words from me enabled

Miss Harding to take her place among the knot of young women waiting their turn at the wings, and as she stood so, the song she had brought clasped loosely in her hands, there was not a soul in the theatre who did not stare at her face with wondering eyes.

I had very little doubt about the issue, nevertheless I felt myself more nervous than my *protégée* appeared to be. It was of very slight importance to her seemingly whether she were accepted or refused, and when at length she was beckoned down to the foot-lights, she obeyed the summons with the composure of a *prima donna*.

I knew she was engaged before she had sung two minutes. The conductor nodded to me, and I took her away, out into the streets again.

"That's all right," I said, "you may reckon your salary as good as in your pocket. Now I am going to lend you a little money, and take lodgings for you somewhere in the neighbourhood,

so that you will not have far to walk for the rehearsals. Come!”

We secured two cheap little rooms, and—never mind how I managed it—I drove there in the afternoon, after she was installed, with her recovered luggage.

I found her quite comfortable, and perfectly at ease.

“I knew you’d bring my things,” she said, cheerfully, “and of course I am ruining you! But I shall repay it all one day, when I’m famous—with interest.”

It was here that I committed my first mistake with her. It was injudicious, since I knew nothing about her; it was bad taste, considering that I had placed her under some obligations to me. I drew nearer to this curious girl, and said:

“You can repay me sooner if you choose.”

Anyone who had seen her as she leant there against the table, on which, in expectation of my visit, tea had been set for two, would have par-

doned me, though in retrospection I do not forgive myself. Her hair, half gold, half brown, had been released from its captivity, and tumbled, rather than fell, about her shoulders. A faint pink flush—perhaps from triumphs anticipated—had tinged her cheeks, and her eyes, the marvellous eyes that could be everything in turn—daredevil, childish, incomprehensible—were turned to me as though to say they knew and understood my sensations far better than their mistress herself would confess.

“You can repay me sooner if you choose!” I muttered.

“How?” she said lightly.

“Let me care for you a little—care for me!”

“Care—already?”

“Why not,” I said recklessly. “Is everything to be reckoned by time? If it is soon to tell you I love you, remember as my excuse that it *is* You. I think *any* man must fall in love with you

in twenty-four hours. I believe I was in love with you last night before you spoke."

"I thought you would be my friend," she said, sadly.

"And am I not your friend, Felicia?"

"I thought you would have pity—have respect. I was mistaken! All men are alike."

"No, no," I exclaimed eagerly, "you misunderstand me, you do indeed. All I ask is the hope that one day when you know me better, I may look forward to—to winning you, darling, to making you my wife. Is it madness?"

I knew even as the words left my lips that it *was* madness—madness dire and complete, but the very efforts I had put forth hitherto to conceal the extraordinary fascination which she exercised over me had weakened my powers of resistance, so that now I was entirely at her mercy. I use that phrase advisedly; I was 'at her mercy'. I felt as if I were drunk—or—a better simile—as

if I were hypnotised. I had proposed marriage to a girl whose acquaintance I had made in a not too desirable fashion, twenty-four hours previously, and it is no exaggeration to declare that had she said "Very well, there is a clergyman present—I will marry you," I should have made her my wife in the next ten minutes.

Heaven be praised, she did not. She shook her head, and sighed:

"Who knows!" she said. "When you reflect, when you are cooler, you will think differently. You will not be always of the same mind."

"How should I be any cooler when I continue to see you?" I urged.

"Am I so wonderful," she smiled. "Ah, well, then you must not see me—I must lose my friend."

"You shall never lose him while I live," I vowed. "Felicia—I may call you 'Felicia'?"

"If you wish," she whispered.

“And you will call me ‘Gerard’?”

“Sit down, and let me give you some tea, Gerard,” she replied.

This answer I found adorable. I sat down; I drank tea, gazing at her the while with all my soul. In twenty minutes she ranged through as many moods, now pensive, now provoking, now gentle, now mocking me with the absurdity of the sentiments I entertained for her. In each mood she was more intoxicating than in the last, and yet, unanalytical as I was, and while I naturally shrank from perceiving it, I could not but have a distressing consciousness that in her serious phases, she was never wholly sincere. When she laughed at me I felt I was talking to Felicia Harding—when she was earnest, or mournful, I suffered from a disagreeable feeling that I was the witness of an admirable display of drawing-room histrionics. Happily she was never mournful unless I forced her to be so by a too intense example.

When I clasped her fingers in parting from her, I drew her to me:

"I may hope, Felicia?"

"Hope to grow wiser," she responded.

"I will not go till you tell me never to love you a whit less than I do."

"Would not that be unkind?"

"It would be angelic!"

"Ah, but I am not an angel. You ask too much," she murmured.

"What are you then?"

"I am a woman."

Had she said a 'devil' it would have been nearer to the truth, but I was far from suspecting it that night. I drew her closer—closer still—she did not resist. My arms closed about her, and her lips, soft and burning, met my own.

"God bless you," I muttered hoarsely, "good night!"

She gave me a glance that promised Heaven, and I tore myself from the room.

On the second day—the second day—that I had known her I had offered to Felicia Harding's keeping the greatest things at my disposal—my honour and my name!

CHAPTER III.

FOR nothing else have I cause to reproach myself. The rest was the inevitable outcome of the one folly. Though much happened afterwards that I passionately regret, I cannot in looking back find occasion to upbraid myself for it; the one act of recklessness committed, the remainder was but a repetition and a sequence—the irresistible ocean of consequences on which I was blindly and helplessly borne.

Were we engaged? I hardly knew as I bent my steps homeward that night—I hardly knew as the next few weeks passed by. I saw her daily; daily I loved her more violently, but for herself, she now laughed at my devotion, now accepted it; never did she hint at her own feelings, never

pledge herself to the understanding for which I had begged. Nevertheless, she regarded me as her property, and I could have established our relations on no other footing without apostasy, even had I wished it. It was a curious, an anomalous position.

Sigismund I had not completely taken into my confidence. I meant to do so later; a shame-faced certainty that he would pronounce me demented, prevented me confessing the truth to him thus early; but I think he suspected something of it, and I was never wholly comfortable now in his society in consequence.

The opera had already been produced at the Galaxy, and whenever it was possible, I made it my rule to meet Felicia as she left the theatre, and escort her as far as her door. The independence I had more than once had occasion to remark in her saved her from any feeling of nervousness in traversing the London streets after nightfall alone, but I myself disliked the idea of

her doing so, and she was never unaccompanied if I could help it.

One night when I met her she was in the gayest of good humours. One of the smaller parts had fallen vacant, and the stage-manager had informed her that after next week the *rôle* would be entrusted to herself.

It was rapid advancement, and I congratulated her with all my heart.

"And so you will rise place by place," I said. "This time next year you may be in the provinces singing 'lead'!"

"In the provinces!" she returned merrily. "In London, my dear Gerard! Why should I waste my best years singing to yokels in the country? No, no, my career is going to be an altogether exceptional one, I promise you! As I've begun, so I mean to go on."

I hoped she might, but I had seen something of the musical profession, and I knew the dis-

appointments and delays that were inseparable from it.

"Don't look for *too* much, dear," I said gently, "or you will not be satisfied with the reality. The best of them have had their period of probation, and when the public talks of a singer 'coming out' in London, she has nine times out of ten been toiling in the provinces unknown to them for years."

"Oh, I daresay," said Felicia, with a toss of the head.

"You mean?"

"I mean that there are women and women. I shall get on not only because I have a voice."

"Admitted," I said; "your face is a very valuable advantage indeed in the vocation you have chosen."

She smiled.

"And I shall get on not merely because I am good-looking, my dear boy. I have something

quite as useful as my face or my voice either—I have tact.”

I did not altogether grasp her meaning, and she perceived it; with a shrug of her shoulders she continued:

“Advancement in my profession is obtained from men; it is men who keep one back, or push one forward on the stage. Who is the author? A man! The composer? A man! The stage-manager at the *Galaxy* is a man. *Alors, I* am a tactful woman.”

It argued great wisdom, I daresay, but it was not exactly the kind of wisdom a lover likes to hear from the lips of the girl he wants to marry. My expression probably did not imply unqualified approval, for after a glance at me, she said sharply, as if to show me she had no intention of humouring my foibles:

“I have made it my business to be very amiable to the stage-manager since I have been at the theatre. You see the result!”

“Am I to understand that this part is given to you, not because you can sing, not because you are beautiful, but because—”

“Oh, I did not say that,” she interrupted with a laugh; “I should say, on the contrary, my being beautiful has a great deal to do with it. Tact is very useful, but without beauty it wouldn’t do everything, you know. Tact is to know the game; to be beautiful is to have the cards in your hand.”

I parted from her when we reached her lodging with a new misgiving at my heart. And yet, madman that I was, it was no warning to me—only an incentive. I seemed to myself destined to be the protecting influence that she needed—her love for me was to show her her better self. I resolved to beg her to give me the right to take care of her without delay, and the following morning I was at her rooms.

She had only just finished breakfast. She wore a loose wrapper of some pale blue material, the first time I had seen her in any costume

approaching *déshabillé*, a sight which makes the woman who is loved more loveable still. On my entrance she looked round with surprise, not, I thought, unmixed with pleasure.

"You have come to say you are sorry for being so disagreeable last night," she said. "Well, sit down, and beg pardon prettily."

"It is a fact that I have been thinking of our conversation last night a great deal."

"With penitence?"

"With penitence of course," I replied, though I was unconscious what I had done.

"Now you are nice!" said Felicia. "And in return I don't mind telling you that you are a big goose not to know that I like you better than all the stage-managers in London."

"Sweetheart!"

She nodded her head quickly like a child. "A big goose," she repeated, "Mr. Gerard Murray! Remember it another time!"

"I remember everything you say to me," I

averred, "pleasant and the reverse. And now I want to ask you something seriously—something that means my whole life, Felicia, when are you going to make me happy?"

She lifted her brows in comic surprise.

"This man," she cried, "is sitting on the arm of my chair, my head is on his shoulder, and he yet presumes to say he is not happy!"

"Felicia, be serious!"

"Well, what then?"

"Darling," I said earnestly, "you know how dear you are to me, you have given me the hope that one day I might look forward to calling you my wife. Felicia, when is that day to be. I love you, I am impatient, be merciful to me!"

"Are we not very good friends as we are?" she murmured in a vexed voice. "Why not leave well alone? What shall we try experiments for—marriage is always an experiment, and curiosity is a fatal sin. Look at poor Blue-beard—if his last wife had not been curious—"

"Felicia, can't you realise that this is not a matter to jest about?"

"Oh," she cried, "you bother me! Let me jest if I can,—it's better than to cry, goodness knows! Well, come, I will be as grave as you like. I don't want to marry anybody. If I did, besides, I would rather marry a rich man than a poor one. Our life together would not be the paradise you imagine; the very qualities in me that fascinate you would disappear if we were together constantly all the year round. The gratitude I have for you would vanish too with the incessant demands upon it."

"I would never remind you by so much as a word," I exclaimed. "What sort of a cad do you take me for!"

"You wouldn't speak of 'gratitude', oh no," she returned, "you would call it 'love'! It is the same thing—that is, the result would be the same! I am not made to be a wife, I haven't the domestic virtues; I am much too selfish, I

could not endure being worried by somebody else's cares—my own are trial enough, I assure you. I am talking to you very frankly, you ought to be very much obliged to me—of course, you aren't—men don't appreciate women's greatest sacrifices—but let me tell you that to be candid with you like this is something, my dear fellow. I am not given that way—to run myself down to anybody. It shows me that I like you better than I knew, that I don't refuse you in pretty sentimental speeches that would send you away with a higher regard for me than you had before."

I took her hand and held it tightly.

"You wrong yourself," I urged, "I am not afraid! Come to me, and if you ever regret it—"

"I shall have only myself to blame!" she added. "Precisely. Oh, you are a strange creature—you puzzle me! I like you—I have told you I like you—why do you want to turn that liking into detestation? Why do you want—why

do you *try*—to lose the woman who charms you in—of all wretched metamorphoses—a wife? Why—?”

Again she looked at me with that incomprehensible gaze of hers, her lips parted, her fingers were twisted in my hair.

“Be sensible,” she murmured, “why insist on giving me more than I ask?”

“More than you ask?” I repeated trembling.

“Oh,” she said, impatiently, “you are stupid! I mean, naturally, our friendship is so delightful why should you have the inclination to spoil it! Listen, I am going to rehearse my new part—tell me how you think it goes!”

But I could not listen. I threw myself at her feet.

“Felicia,” I said, “I implore you! There are no words for me to tell you what you are to me. Day and night I am thinking of you, longing for you. I will forbid you nothing—whatever you

desire will be my own wish—I will worship you. You say I should lose your liking were I your husband, but why, why? A husband whose only purpose in life was to indulge your fancies, to gratify your whims, would that be so unbearable? And if I am not rich, I could at least promise you comfort. And I shall not be always so poor as I am to-day! I am young—my position will improve. Think, have pity!”

“You are making me tired,” she said, “with your interminable petitions. I have answered you frankly and openly, and if I talked for an hour and a half, which I am not going to do, I could say nothing that expressed my feelings so well. We will go on as we are if you please—nothing further. That is my last word.”

“And this is mine,” I answered, rising with white cheeks; “I have offered you all that a man can give, and for reply you tell me that it would bore you—worse, cause you to detest me. You have accepted my devotion—you expect it still—

yet you yourself choose to grant nothing at all. I am to adore you, and you in return will allow yourself to be adored. Miss Harding, I may be a fool—I am afraid I have proved myself to be one—but I am not such a fool as that!”

She looked at me an instant in a dead silence, then she extended her hand—quite coolly, with something of wounded pride in the gesture.

“Good-bye, Mr. Murray,” she said; “you have come to a very sensible resolution. I should be the last person in the world to persuade you to break it.” She turned her back to me, and reseated herself at the piano, and half out of my mind with despair, I hurried out of the house.

I was twenty-five. I have no other excuse either for my devotion or my denseness—I was five-and-twenty!

Need I paint a picture of the days that ensued? I kept to my intention, and subduing all my impulses to the contrary, did not approach

Felicia. 'Impulses'! There were long hours in which my brain swam with the contest I was waging with myself, hours when her face came before me so vividly that I could have cried aloud in my lonely room for the sound of her voice—for her skirt merely to brush me as she passed by. Fearful that the craving would prove too strong for me after all, I prevailed on myself to seek out Frith as often as I could bear to do so, and to place myself, so to speak, under his protection. I told him now much of what had occurred between Miss Harding and me, explaining that I had decided not to see her any more, a resolve that he warmly applauded. The wisdom of your friend, who is *not* in love, is truly surprising. I have often marvelled he should always commit such stupidities himself when his own turn comes.

We used to sit in his parlour smoking, of an evening, Sigismund expounding his theories on the sexual relations, I half sunk in reverie, yet

rousing myself in moments to meet him with a confutation, the force of which he would never admit. He was a good friend to me at that period, however—when I needed one sorely—and had he not left Town just when I was beginning to grow reconciled to the position, perhaps—. But I deceive myself, *che sarà sarà*; his presence might have delayed it, nothing more!

Let me set down the facts as they happened.

Frith went to Canterbury for a few days. He was reluctant to desert me just then, but it was business, and I knew the importance of it. I told him he was to go, and arranged to be with him on the evening of his return. It was even settled that he should wire me the time of his arrival.

The first day or two after his departure were the busiest of my week. We cannot dispose of our pupils as we would, and mine were distributed very unevenly, a fact for which I was

just now sincerely glad. I was occupied; and, if I thought of Felicia, the thoughts were stolen ones, snatched in the midst of work. There was no time, till evening at least, for that desperate longing for her to get its hold of me, and after nightfall I forced myself to compose, in the effort to keep my mind away from the forbidden ground.

It was the third night after Sigismund had gone that the thought of her gripped me so that it would not be denied. Every kind word she had spoken to me, every time my lips had touched her cheek, came back in memory to torture me. I shut my eyes, but I saw her still. My glance wandered towards the clock; it was the hour I had been used to leave home when it had been my habit to meet her at the stage-door. Should I go? I might catch a glimpse of her, though I did not speak!

I wrestled with the temptation—twice I thought I had conquered it, but it reasserted itself with a

persistence that was damnable. If I went I *should* speak to her, I knew it, yet, again and again, I juggled with my conscience by repeating that she need never know I had been there.

The clock struck eleven. Even so I might get there before she came out.

I caught up my hat, and without allowing myself space for further reflection rushed into the street. A passing hansom suggested that I might easily make sure of reaching the familiar corner in time. I hailed the driver, and sprang in.

"The stage entrance of the Galaxy Theatre," I called. "Stop at the bottom of the court!"

As we sped along, my emotion almost suffocated me. It appeared to me already an age since I had seen her last, and the knowledge that I was about to behold her once more—nay, if I wished it, to renew the sweetness of our ambiguous relations—was ecstasy to me. The very doubt of what might be the upshot had its charm—the sensation of having abandoned myself to a weak-

ness that might lead me I knew not where, was itself exciting, now all effort to combat it was past. The hansom drew up with a jerk, in the rear of another, and I pulled out my watch. I had done it—she was scarcely due.

The next moment I saw her coming down the narrow way. There was a gentleman beside her, and she seemed quite at ease. Her companion signed to the cab ahead of me, and Felicia and he got in. At the same instant she turned and her gaze fell on me. A cry I could not repress burst from my lips, but she paid no heed. The doors closed with a bang, the wheels revolved, and she and the man had driven away. I sat motionless, staring out into the darkness in the direction in which they had gone.

CHAPTER IV.

I HAD never suffered as I suffered in those minutes that ensued, in which Heaven itself seemed to have fallen about me in ruins. How long I remained so, dumb and dazed, I have no idea. Presently the cabman's voice reached me through the trap above my head.

"They are shutting up the door, sir," he said; "everybody's out."

It roused me. "Yes, I don't want you any more," I answered; and, getting out, I paid him, and strolled away, while he followed me, I fancy, with inquisitive eyes.

I made my way homeward unconsciously. I saw nothing of the crowd through which I took myself, the one, the only thing which I understood

was that Felicia had found a lover, for could I doubt that? I did not at any rate, and it was the fiercest agony I had ever had to bear.

I let myself in with my latchkey, and going upstairs, was surprised to find Sigismund in my room. It transpired that he had returned on impulse, a day earlier than he had intended, and it only needed a glance at my face to convince him that I had not proved so strong during his absence as he had hoped.

"I was afraid," he said; "I can tell by the look of you that my fear was justified! You are seeing that woman again?"

"Yes," I said, dropping on to the couch, "I have seen her again."

"When I learnt you were out, I had very little doubt where you had gone. And this is your firmness, your self-respect!"

"Oh, say what you like!" I cried. "At least I shall never see her any more. It is over, ended. She has a lover."

"The best thing that could have happened for you," exclaimed Sigismund; "permit me to congratulate you very heartily."

"And I wish I were dead," I added; "congratulate me on that too!"

He filled a pipe, and sat ruminating.

"Well, you may as well tell me all about it," he said, and when I had told him, explaining that I had remained constant to my resolution until an hour ago, he repeated that I was very stupid not to perceive how wise that resolve had been.

"You have had an escape for which you can never thank your stars too ardently," he said. "You see what manner of girl she is, and, as it happens, you see it in the position of a spectator. Had you married her, and discovered it then, what would your life have been! Reflect for a moment."

"Had I married her she would never have succumbed to the temptation," I said. "Alone,

deserted by me, is it so wonderful she has been weak!"

"‘Deserted’ by you?" he echoed. "For Heaven’s sake, don’t be such an ass! Why, she gave you your *congé*, man, if ever woman gave it to a man yet."

"It was I," I cried, "who refused to see her any more!"

"Because she rejected you!"

"Then if she rejected me, why was my resolve so wise as you say? She would never have been my wife under any circumstances!"

"Oh," said Sigismund, impatiently, "what are you trying to prove—that *you* are a man of the world, or that *she* is an angel?" And he fell to pulling at his pipe again.

It was while we were sitting there so, I sunk upon the sofa, and Frith glowering at me through the tobacco-wreaths, that a sudden knocking came at the street-door. I don’t know why, but instinctively we both looked up, and listened.

"Who's that?" said Frith, though he knew I was in no position to answer.

"Nobody is up," I murmured; "I'll go down, I think."

I went downstairs, and opened the door, and there in the light of the lamp, pale as death, and with shining eyes, stood Felicia. I suppose I had hoped for it, strange as it was, for somehow my surprise was small. I was conscious only of an overwhelming joy.

"I must speak to you," she said; "I came to-night because—because I dared not wait till to-morrow. Let me in."

"Frith is upstairs," I said huskily, "but if you don't mind—he will go when he sees you."

I doubt if she heard my words, at any rate she paid no heed to them. She preceded me hastily up the staircase, and into the parlour, loosening the fur at her throat as she did so.

"I must speak to you," she repeated as I

entered; "I have something that I will, that I must, say!"

Sigismund rose, and with a warning glance at me, prepared to depart. He could not content himself with the glance, however; he excused himself for wishing to speak a few words with me on business, and drew me outside.

"For some motive that I don't understand," he said, "she has come to persuade you that you have wronged her by your suspicions. Be prepared for it, and if your honour and happiness are of any value to you, be firm. Good night."

I gripped his hand, and went back to the room. Felicia came forward to meet me, with outstretched arms.

"Gerard," she moaned.

"Hush," I said, "don't agitate yourself, be calm! You—you have something to say to me?"

"Gerard!" she gasped again, and then, burying her face on the table, she broke into sobs.

It must have been some minutes that she sobbed there helplessly, and I, standing by her, strove with clumsy compassion to restore her to herself. I had never seen her cry before, and the sight of her tears seemed to twist my very heartstrings.

"Felicia," I begged, "speak to me—tell me. What can I do? What has happened?"

"Believe me," she muttered, "believe me when I swear to you—! I am here to-night—I could not rest—while you thought, while you thought—. Oh, you have wronged me, I swear it on my soul!"

"And yet I saw you," said I, as sternly as I could. "With whom were you then? No one I have seen before!"

With a cry of torture she clasped her hands, and before I could stay her, before I so much as divined her intention, she threw herself on the ground at my feet.

"I was tempted," she wailed, "for a moment,

for a moment only, I was tempted; I own it—to my shame it is true! For a week he has been persecuting me with his hateful bouquets and notes; I have sent them back, his notes and his diamonds too! But to-night he met me as I left home, and prayed to me, and implored me. He begged that I would at least give him a patient hearing, and I promised that after the performance he might drive me to my door. Oh, I was wicked, I was shameful, but he loved me, he vowed he loved me so dearly, and *you* had left me—I was all alone!” Her emotion choked her; for myself, it was a moment before I dared to trust my voice.

“He ‘loved’ you,” I said at last coldly, “did he ask you to be his wife?”

“He *would*,” she said in a whisper, “but he *cannot*. He is married—it is the Duke of Winchester.”

I stared at her.

“A Duke,” I sneered, “and such a duke! What wonder you were not adamant!”

“I have been all that you would have me be,” she flung back; “yes, though he were fifty dukes, my answer would have been the same! I was tempted for an instant—is my fault so great? For an instant! And I was lonely, lonely, all alone! Gerard, I am here to ask you to believe—to help me. Protect me from him—I dare not return to the theatre any more!”

“You *dare* not?”

“I am frightened of him. He will never rest—he has sworn it! My life will be a hell, he will—. Oh,” she almost shrieked, “keep me from him,—you said you loved me—save me from that man!”

I clasped her in my arms, soothing, encouraging, raining kisses on her brow and lips.

“He shall never approach you again,” I said, “never, never, dear! You shall not go back to

the theatre, the stage shall never know you any more. Why need you work to live? My home is yours, like my love—my life. If I can give you nothing else, at least I can give you security and peace. Felicia, again I entreat you—let me make you my wife.”

For a second she looked at me silently, almost wonderingly, it seemed. Then her head drooped back upon my shoulder with a sigh of content.

“I love you,” she said; “I think you are the noblest man that ever lived!”

Before we separated I had arranged everything. On the morrow she was to send a note to the theatre to say she was unwell, and remove to some lodgings that I knew of without mentioning anything by which she might be traced. We would be married by Registrar as quickly as the necessary formalities would permit, and once she were my wife, I would soon banish from

her mind even the recollection of her present pain.

The first portion of the programme was duly carried out. The few days that had to elapse before the most important feature could be fulfilled I passed almost entirely in her society, contenting myself with a brief interview with Frith, in which I announced my intention. He was not temperate in his amazement, and the interview, if brief, was stormy.

The wedding morning dawned at length. My hands shook so when I rose that I could scarcely make my toilette. The fact that Felicia was really to be mine—my very own—seemed almost incredible now it was so near, and I could barely realise it. I shuddered with the fear that even now I might be balked of the marvellous good fortune within my touch by some unforeseen catastrophe, and, reaching her apartments, my tongue at first refused to formulate the perfunctory inquiry whether she was in.

She stood in the simple sitting-room awaiting me. The picture comes back to me as I write. Again I see the smile upon her lips, the welcoming light in her eyes, as she advanced and greeted me. Again I scent the odour of the knot of tuberose she had fastened in her dress. Again I hear the first low words she spoke: "So you really love me well enough—you have not changed your mind!"

We went out together into the cab that awaited us below. Her little gloved hand lay upon my knee. I lifted and kissed it, but I said nothing. I had passed beyond words.

The sun was shining. I can see the streets as they looked that morning as we drove along.

How close and ugly was the office; how stupid the meaningless gabble of the official! Yet meaningless as it appeared, it was giving me Felicia. In intervals only I grasped the sense of it;

I was all the time thinking, "He is giving you Felicia, that is what he says—he says, 'I give you Felicia!'"

It was over—I understood it with a jerk. The sun was still shining, but no longer on London—on Paradise. How did we travel? I do not know! I saw nothing but Felicia; nothing was real but Felicia. And then we were in the sweet-scented parlour of a country cottage, gazing from the window on the river that wandered sleepily past our door. Twilight was falling. Felicia had exchanged her tuberose for a sprig of lavender gathered from the old-world garden—it became her better, I thought. There was wine on the table—but I did not need wine—my brain buzzed enough without—and Felicia was in white—all white, save for the pale fragrant blossoms at her throat. I had been in a dream, and now I awoke with a gasp to the dazzling reality. Probation was past, and the girl I loved lay on my heart. I strained her to me in a paroxysm of worship;

we clung together breathless; I knelt before her as I might to Heaven, and kissed her feet. Nothing could undo it now—Felicia was my wife!

CHAPTER V.

WE remained in seclusion for a fortnight—a fortnight that no words can paint, that few imaginations can grasp—and then I brought my wife back to Town. During some days we stayed at a small Hotel while we sought an inexpensive flat in which to set up our household gods. I was making at this stage about two hundred a year, which with the annual hundred or so left me by my father offered us, I thought, security against any sordid pecuniary cares. Felicia was of the same mind. She knew my position as well as I knew it myself, and appeared equally content. I had, as I have said, always lived quietly, and I was possessed of sufficient money in the bank to enable us to adorn our home

prettily. The mornings on which we roamed through London choosing our furniture, resisting the temptation of a Wardour Street cabinet, only to succumb to it in the afternoon, and falling in love now with a piece of blue china, now with some tapestry, were among the most delightful I had ever known.

I cannot say exactly when it was that the first vague consciousness crept into my mind that Felicia's satisfaction was beginning to wane, and when it did so, I reminded myself that during my absence her days were necessarily dull.

Yes, I made excuses for her, as, by degrees, no doubt was left me that my wife was *hipped* and *triste*, and I strove to arrange so that the evenings should make amends for the lonely days.

We frequently visited the theatre, for instance, but whereas Felicia's excitement and pleasure while out were so intense as to startle me, I could not fail to observe that on our return she was

always more dejected and melancholy than before.

It was not long—we had not been married three months—ere I understood the cause.

The girl I had made my wife had been born with a thirst, an incurable passion, for notoriety. To sing in public, to be applauded and admired, was as necessary to her existence as air itself. She actually wanted to return to the stage—the stage which she had, none the less, married me to escape. When the truth came out, I stared at her wholly mystified.

We had been to see some new burlesque that everyone was talking about, and as we sat at home at the simple supper that had been prepared for us, Felicia, after a poor pretence of bearing me company, at last pushed her plate and glass aside, and sprang to her feet with an impatient gesture.

“I can’t eat,” she said, “it sickens me!”

“What? What is the matter? It seems to

me all right." I thought she referred solely to the meal set forth.

"Oh, it is luxurious," she replied, rather hysterically, "the supper—and the room with its two gas-burners—and our life altogether! It is a whirl of gaiety!"

I put my knife and fork down, and went across to her.

"You are not yourself," I said; "what has upset you, dear?"

"When I see those women," she flared out, "and contrast their life with mine, it breaks my heart! I will never, never go to a theatre again. I envy them; it makes me miserable; I envy every chorus girl at a pound a week. And to think what I might have become if I had been my own mistress! All London might have been raving about me!"

"Felicia, are you in earnest?" I demanded gravely; "is it possible you regret what you were so very anxious to obtain? Not three months

ago you cried that the thought of the stage was terrible to you."

"Because I was afraid," she muttered, "because I was afraid! But there are theatres in other countries—I might get engagements in America. Oh, that man has ruined my life!"

"The Duke? He has 'ruined your life' because he has caused you to marry me?"

She answered nothing, but threw herself into a chair, rocking herself to and fro.

I did not know what to make of her, and I looked at her with a horrible pain at my heart. There was no mistaking her meaning that she regretted the price she had paid to escape from that person of whom she had stood in so much fear, and that, coeval with her regret, was an anger against myself for the monotonous existence which fretted her now. I think it was at this moment that I first wondered why a woman like Felicia should have considered it necessary to hide herself in order to avoid the Duke's un-

welcome attentions. The disproportion between her marriage, her seclusion, and the unpleasantness it was designed to remedy struck me suddenly in a curious light. I could no longer dupe myself, she had made self-delusion impossible—she did not, and had never loved me. Why then had she relinquished a career for which she had so profound an adoration for such a reason as she had intimated to me?

It was the question that continued to bewilder me as time went on. There was something behind it to which I could not penetrate. Felicia's *ennui* suffered no diminution, and from a period of almost feverish ecstasy I found myself abruptly transported to life with a woman who received my caresses with the insentience of a statue. Do you ask if this brought me to my senses? Yes, and no. She was so far as I was concerned a statue, and I realised it; but this statue inspired me with a violent passion that I could not subdue. The memory of our honeymoon when she had acted

to me, and simulated reciprocity, fed my devotion, and prevented it dying, factitious as the fuel was. I kissed her with the wild hope of awakening within her some faint echo of the tumult in my own breast. Why should I make excuses? I kissed her because I was mad about her, and could not help myself—because whether I was anything to her or not, *she* to *me* remained the one woman in the world.

One evening when I came home, she told me she had obtained an engagement, and was going back to the stage.

“If you wish it so strongly,” I answered, “you must go; there is nothing to be said.” I had not known she was taking any steps in the direction, and the lack of confidence she had displayed hurt me more than I chose to confess.

“Naturally,” rejoined Felicia, “there is nothing to be said. It is *I* who run the risk, not you!”

“You ‘run the risk’? What do you mean—what risk?” said I.

She did not reply, and I repeated my inquiry.

"Why do you run a risk?"

"Because I was an idiot, an imbecile!" she said passionately, and relapsed into silence.

I waited till she was calmer;

"What theatre are you going to?"

"To the Frivolity," she said. "I begin rehearsals to-morrow.

"I hope they will amuse you," I murmured.

"They will be something to do at any rate," she returned. "That will be a novelty in itself."

I lit a cigarette, and meditated on the irony of fate by which so fervid a devotion as mine left a woman like Felicia so cold.

The rehearsals, as she had said, commenced on the morrow, and she was always in a better humour now. After the opera had been produced, my evenings were of course passed in solitude, but I made a practice of meeting her at the conclusion of the performance, and she returned home in my company. I thought she

seemed glad of my escort, and this little manifestation of tenderness on her part was the more welcome to me by reason of her general indifference.

She had not been back on the boards two weeks when, entering the flat one afternoon after my day's work, I found her in a state of the wildest agitation. She was on her knees before her trunks, hurriedly thrusting in her belongings, and at the sight of me she turned, and exclaimed:

"You must take me away. I cannot remain any longer—you must take me away before seven o'clock."

"What has happened?" I cried, thoroughly startled. "What are you packing up for?"

"Don't I tell you," she muttered, "you must take me away. I am not going to stop here, I must escape at once!"

"Escape! From whom? What are you talking about?"

"From him," she said rapidly. "He has

found me again. He was here just now—he is coming back at seven o'clock."

"Are you mad!" I demanded. "He is coming back, is he?—well, let him come! In Heaven's name do you suppose our life is to be spent in running away from the scoundrel, as if I were alarmed by him? What have you to fear? You must be crazy!"

She still continued her operations, cramming in clothes, linen and brushes with feverish haste, and I seized her hands.

"Leave off," I cried, "are you a baby! What do you imagine the man can do if he does come? I will warrant he won't come twice! And why did you not tell him merely that your husband would receive him when he returned. For a woman like you, you seem curiously inexperienced in your dealings with the duke!"

"You need not insult me," she said with white lips. "I have never disguised from you that I am afraid of him. Women are always

afraid of men who are as mad for them as *he* is for *me!*”

“He must be mad indeed,” I said bitterly; “I have never observed that you stand in much fear of myself! Anyhow I tell you to desist; I am not going to take you away—it is the most ridiculous request I ever heard of in my life. Besides which, he would only have to go down to the theatre if I did!”

“The theatre won’t see me any more,” she gasped; “my career is ended.”

“You are going to leave the Frivolity now too? Is this man the devil that he terrifies you so! Well, as far as the theatre goes, you may please yourself—I was never anxious to see you in one—but you will *not* leave your home, Felicia, to-night or at any other time.”

She got up, abandoning the yawning trunk and the litter on the ground without dispute.

“Very well,” she said, “then you may stay here by yourself to meet him! I suppose you

have no objection to my being out when he comes?"

"You may entirely please yourself in that matter," I answered, "and when I see you again, I hope to find you more sensible."

She put on her hat and cloak, and snatching up her gloves excitedly, opened the door, and disappeared. I went into the sitting room and waited.

CHAPTER VI.

AT half-past seven he had not arrived. The clock pointed to eight and I waited still. The tension I was at made this delay well nigh insupportable.

When nine struck, two things seemed evident to me: that the duke had changed his plan of campaign, and Felicia had altered her intention about not returning to the theatre, for that she could be pacing the streets all this time was impossible.

At a quarter to eleven I was resigned to the fact that the interview with the Duke of Winchester to which I was looking forward must be one of the pleasures of the morrow, and leaving the house, I made my way to the Frivolity stage-door to meet Felicia.

The doorkeeper knew me by sight, and I had scarcely entered the narrow passage than he looked up, and, addressing me through his window, said:

“Are you waiting for your wife, sir? She didn’t come down to-night.”

I tried to mask my astonishment, and, muttering something—I hardly know what—turned away to wonder miserably what had become of her.

She had not returned when I reached home, and though I did not retire until an early hour of the morning, she had not come then.

All the night I lay awake, demanding of myself what had become of her and meditating schemes of vengeance on the man who was responsible for so wild a condition of affairs. I was fully resolved to thrash him within an inch of his life, and after a hasty apology for a breakfast, I turned my steps in the direction of his town house, with the exterior of which, in

common with most Londoners, I suppose, I was familiar.

On the road I went into a saddler's, and provided myself with a most admirable horsewhip, one that was warranted to leave its reminder upon His Grace for some weeks to come; and, slipping this up my sleeve when my destination was gained, I went up the polished granite steps, and knocked and rang.

The door was opened by a sober-faced functionary who might have been in training for a bishop, so severe was his demeanour, so solemn were his tones, and learning that His Grace was indeed within—a piece of good fortune for which I confess I was hardly prepared—I begged that he might be informed that a gentleman wished to see him on private and important business.

The non-appearance of a card was, I am afraid, damaging to me in the servitor's estimation, but after a few minutes' absence, he returned, and asked me to take a seat in the library.

I had scarcely done so when the door opened, and a gentleman advanced towards me, who I saw at the first glance was not the one I sought. The glimpse I had obtained of Felicia's companion from the hansom had been brief, but distinct.

I was not mistaken. The gentleman was Mr. Athelstan St. Clair, the duke's private secretary.

"The duke is very busily engaged just now," he said, courteously. "He would be glad if you would inform me on what subject you desire to see him."

"Tell the duke," I replied, that the matter is one impossible to discuss through a third party. It is essential that I should see him personally."

"I am afraid that that is out of the question," said the private secretary. "The duke never sees strangers; it is not his custom."

"Tell him, please," I said, "that I bring a

message from Miss Harding. I think that will be enough."

Mr. St. Clair withdrew, and I could hear that he entered the adjoining room.

After a minute he re-appeared.

"His Grace knows no one of the name you mentioned," he said. "If you have anything further to explain, it would be better that you should write to His Grace."

"It would be better still that I should see him!" I muttered angrily, and, as he bowed me out, I turned the handle of the apartment where I knew the duke was sitting, and strode in.

I was dismayed to see nobody there but a stout elderly gentleman sitting by a fire with a newspaper on his knee, and a *pince-nez* on his nose. At my intrusion, followed hastily by the secretary and the servant, he lifted his head, and looked up with a frown of disapproval.

"What is the meaning of this, St. Clair," he said, "I told you I would not see this man!"

"I wish to see the Duke of Winchester," I exclaimed, cutting short Mr. St. Clair's apologies to his employer.

"Well, sir, you see him! And what do you want; and who is 'Miss Harding', if you please?"

The colour went from my face, and I remained stupidly staring at him for so long that at length, losing patience altogether, he waved his hand towards the footman, and said irritably:

"Show the man out!" and without another word, picked up his paper, and became oblivious of my existence.

I stumbled, rather than walked, down the steps on to the pavement. My brain whirled—with chagrin and bewilderment. For what purpose had Felicia lied to me? And since she had deceived me, who *was* the man who she had told me was a nobleman to whom he bore not the slightest resemblance?

So great was my confusion that there seemed to me no possible explanation of the mystery, and

but for the indisputable evidence of my senses, I should have said that I was suffering from an hallucination. The horsewhip I had bought, to punish an inoffensive gentleman who did not even know that my wife lived, seemed to mock me in my nerveless hand, and, in a deserted street, I flung it away with a groan of impotent despair.

Felicia had not come home. I was now seriously alarmed about her, and even thought of attempting to trace her by means of the police. Good or bad, she was my wife, and I was half out of my mind with misgivings on her account. The servant informed me that a gentleman had called during my absence, and had appeared greatly discomposed to learn that Felicia was not within. I pricked up my ears.

“Did you mention *me?*” I inquired.

“No, sir; the gentleman did not ask for you.”

“Whom *did* he ask for—‘Mrs. Murray’?”

“No, sir; he said, ‘Is your mistress in, girl—I must see her!’”

"He did not say 'Miss Harding' either?"

"No, sir!" Then he had not come from the theatre! He was, beyond doubt, *the* man—the man whom Felicia had inspired with so reckless a passion, he was the man I had to see.

"Did he say anything about coming any more?"

"Yes, sir; he said, 'When your mistress comes in, tell her I shall be here for her this evening. She has escaped me twice—she will not escape me a third time.'"

Was he a lunatic, this person?

"That will do," I said. "When he presents himself, and asks again, show him in. I wish to see him."

I picked up a book, and attempted to pass the time by reading, but I could not concentrate my attention on the tale for the space of a single paragraph.

An hour later there was a ring of the front-door bell. Was it Felicia, or her lover?

Neither. Of all people in the world, Sigismund Frith entered—Sigismund whom I had not seen since my marriage.

He came forward rather bashfully, as if doubtful of his reception.

“You are surprised to see me,” he said. “The fact is I have come to ask you to bury the hatchet. We used to be such good friends, and, well—our estrangement has hurt me!”

I was gripping his hand in no time.

“The fault was mine,” I said, “and the *amende honorable* has been made by you! If you’ll accept it as an excuse—I have been *ashamed* to come to you, old man!”

“Oh,” he said genially, “don’t let us talk of it!” He sat down, his eyes roving round the room, which was new to him. “You have fixed yourselves up very charmingly here,” he remarked. “And Mrs. Murray, your wife,—she is quite well, I hope?”

I hesitated, but things were at too desperate a pass for any deception to be possible.

“Possibly,” I said; “I’m in no position to answer that!”

“You are in no position to—?” Sigismund’s face was very grave. “You are not together then?”

“My wife left me last night ostensibly to take a walk,” I explained, “and she has not returned.”

“But—but,” cried Frith, “it is to be supposed that she has met with an accident. Aren’t you making any inquiries?”

“I have every hope of making some very urgent inquiries in the course of the next hour or two. A gentleman who appears to be as deeply and as tenderly interested in her as I, will be calling then, and as it will be the first time he and I have met, the conversation will doubtless be interesting. I thought it might be he when

you rang. By the way, how did you find out where I was?"

"I called at your old 'digs'," said Frith. He paused a moment. "Then she has not left you for—for anybody else?" he asked.

"Seemingly not! It was really to avoid this man that she went out yesterday."

"She is taking a long walk!" said Frith.

"Very," I admitted. "Yet, since he comes here to ask if she is in, they are obviously not together."

"Who is he?" said Frith, taking out a cigar, and slowly biting off the end.

I tried to laugh; "He is not the Duke of Winchester."

"Is that a conundrum?" asked Frith.

"No, but she told me that he was; and this morning I forced myself into the duke's house, into his presence, and found him a stranger who had never heard her name. Heaven knows why

she should have told me the gratuitous lie — *I* don't!"

"Vanity," said Frith sententiously. He smoked a little, and I remembered we had sat like that in silence, he smoking, and I looking at him, on the night a few months before when Felicia came into our midst with a blanched face, and false tears in her eyes to say she would marry me.

"Give me a cigar!" I said. "What's the time? The man is late. This is the second evening I have waited for him. Will you have a drink?"

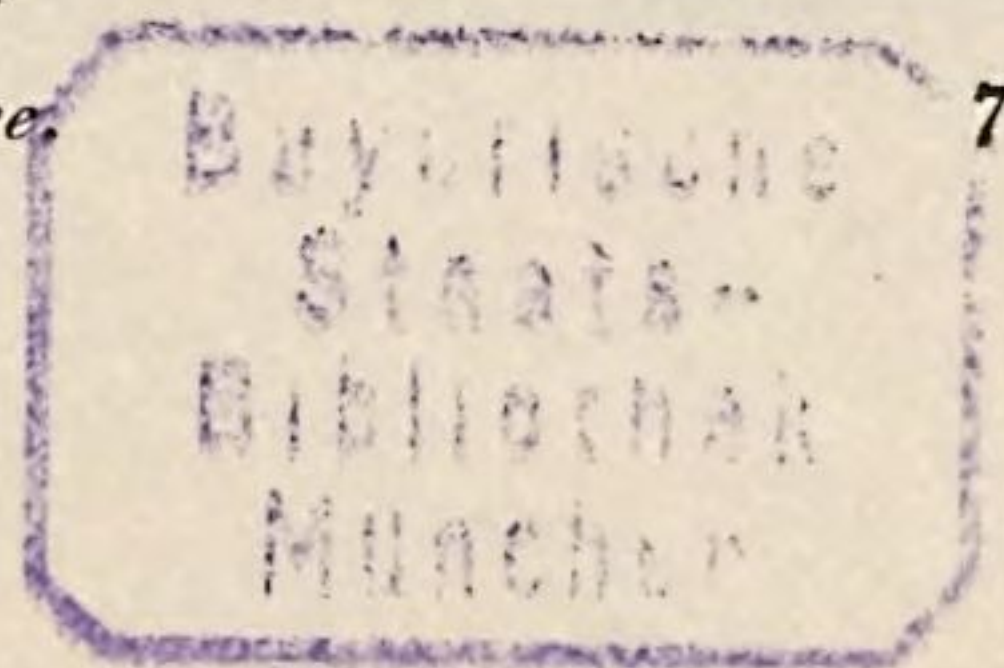
He said he would. I poured a little whisky into two glasses, and we sat sipping it, and listening.

"Were you happy?" said Frith at last abruptly.

"At first; yes, I was in Paradise. She—she is a beautiful woman, Frith; you'll admit that?"

"Yes, she is beautiful," he said, "but—but—. Ah well, you may be very happy together again!"

"I fear not," I said. "You know she went back to the stage?"



"I did not! Why?"

"Dull."

"In three months?"

"In less."

"She was not long in tiring of the domestic joys."

"Perhaps that was my fault. I left her alone so much."

"But it was your profession!"

"Yes; nothing else would have induced me to leave her even for an hour. I worshipped her, Sigismund; no man since the world began ever cared for a woman more deeply than *I* did for *her*. You can form no idea! And now—even now—if she gave me a word of tenderness—."

He did not reply—by speech. In looking back, I see he was in a difficult position. I and she were still husband and wife; any hour might bring about our reconciliation. His difficulty did not last long.

At that moment the bell rang again, and I held up my hand.

"Hush," I said; "don't speak!"

We heard the servant cross the passage, and caught a man's inquiring tones.

"It's he!" I whispered exultantly. "Whatever happens, don't interfere."

The handle turned, a figure loomed in the doorway and at last I was face to face with the man whom I had seen with Felicia in the cab. He had not taken two paces across the threshold ere my back was to the door, and thus, confident that he could not escape me, I stood and looked at him.

He was a pale, grave-faced man of forty years or thereabouts. A gentleman evidently, and yet, I fancied, not a clubman either by the air of him—not the dandy I had looked for. There was something that bespoke the country in his aspect. Now that we were at close quarters, and in a good light, he was somehow different from the roué I had pictured. There was a certain wholesomeness and simplicity about him.

As I turned and faced him, he started, and drew himself erect, as if on the defensive. He threw a swift glance from me to Frith sitting in the armchair, and, from Frith, back again to me.

"What is the meaning of this, gentlemen?" he asked harshly. "I did not look for you!"

"I suppose not," I said quietly. "But I have looked for *you*, and I am very glad to see you."

There was an insolence in my voice that he could not affect to ignore, nor did he ignore it.

"You will be kind enough to make your business with me as brief as possible, my good fellow," he said, curtly. "I have no time to waste. If you know why I am here, you will understand it."

"I believe I do know why you are here," I answered; "but I may be mistaken—I should like you to tell me."

"Who the devil are you, sir?" he demanded. "And by what right do you either cross-examine me, or show yourself in this room?"

"I can reply to both your questions at once," said I grimly. "I am the husband of the lady who has commissioned me to thrash you!"

Almost before I realised his intention, his hands were at my throat, and we were struggling together like men possessed. He was more powerfully built than I, but I had the greater skill. None the less it was more by luck than by judgment that I threw him.

He fell with a great crash, prone upon the floor, and lay there quite still and unconscious, his face upturned. For a moment a horrible fear turned me faint that I had killed him.

"By God," said Sigismund in a hoarse whisper, "he is dead!"

"No, man, no!" I gasped. "Where is the water? Here, feel his heart, while I force some whisky down his throat."

The eyes opened as I knelt beside him, and if ever I encountered a look of hatred, I met it then.

"Sit in that chair," I said, "and drink something. You deserve to be killed, but perhaps half-measures will be lesson enough!"

He waved the glass aside, and staggered to his feet. I doubt if he heard my taunt.

"You are her lover, you say?" he asked hoarsely, as soon as his voice would come.

"I am her husband," said I, "as I have had the honour to inform you!"

"Call it what you will," he gasped; "where is she?"

"That is my affair."

"Yours? Yours? You blackguard," he cried in a fierce gust of passion, "I have come to fetch her—I have come to take her home."

"Who—Felicia?"

"Yes—my wife!"

CHAPTER VII.

IF a bombshell had burst in the room it could not have stupified me more than did his last two words.

"What did you say?" I muttered, falling back a step. "Your 'wife'?"

"Surely," he answered, meeting my gaze fully; "and you knew that, I suppose? For she has evidently given me the slip again, and left you, her paramour, in her place!"

"I knew nothing," I said firmly; "and I was married by license before the Registrar, to the lady whom you call your wife only a few months since."

It was his turn to be amazed now. He stared at me dumbly, and then, drawing a deep breath, said:

"If what you say is true, I am afraid I owe

you an apology for the manner of my entrance here to-night."

"No more than *I* owe *you* for the reception you received, I fear," I answered. "I regarded you in the light of one endeavouring to undermine the virtue of the lady to whom honestly I believed myself to be married."

Sigismund got up, and bade me adieu.

"I am in the way here," he said, "I will leave you for the present. Good evening, gentlemen."

I forbade him to go.

"You who have known the history of my love for this woman step by step, cannot do better than remain," I said. Then, turning to the stranger, I added: "My friend, Mr. Frith, can corroborate my statement; he knows that I married Felicia, and I was in his company the evening that I first saw her."

"Where was that?" inquired her husband.

"At Charing Cross. She came up to me in the waiting room, and asked me for assistance."

"Good God!" he exclaimed, and, rising, commenced to pace the room in agitation.

"The clue to that unhappy girl's nature," he broke out after a pause, "is an insatiable passion for admiration and notoriety! All that she has done has been prompted by it, and with it all, she is as simple and shortsighted as a child!"

It was not for me to argue with him, nor was I capable of it, but inwardly I took leave to disagree with his last assertion. I confess I was not prepared for the instance that came with his next words, and which recalled to me one of Felicia's outbursts that had puzzled me at the time—"Because I was an idiot, an imbecile!"

"In proof of it, merely to escape me, she has laid herself open to a prosecution for bigamy," he said. "Let me tell you my story, and you shall judge!"

"When I first met Felicia she was twenty-two; her father was the Vicar of Whitefields, and she was his only child. I fell in love with her before

I had known her a week, and I strove by every means in my power to awaken some tenderness in her in return. She accepted my devotion, she even seemed pleased by it, but at the end of six months I was as far from being able to flatter myself that she cared for me as I had been at the beginning.

“It was about this time that her father died; she was left practically penniless, and I offered her a home—I begged her to be my wife.”

He stopped, and filling a tumbler with water, drained it at a draught.

“She accepted me,” he continued, “and I endeavoured to persuade myself that the love which was absent then would be born in her when we were married.

“I ought to have told you that when she found herself alone in the world, her idea had been to become a public singer on the stage, and we had not been married a month before I

realised that she regretted having been induced to become my wife instead.

“I loved her—I love her yet—and I argued with her tenderly enough. All that a husband could do to make a woman happy I did, but in vain. Felicia was always melancholy and dissatisfied. Still I hoped. Time, I thought, would prove my best friend. The ineradicable warp of her nature I regarded as a defect of youth, and that she could ever meditate leaving me never entered my mind.

“That she did leave me you know. She left me last August, with a brief note to the effect that her life ‘bored her’, an assurance that it would be impossible to trace her, and that I should be ill-advised to try. Nothing more heartless was ever written.

“It need not be said that I attempted nevertheless to discover her whereabouts by every means in my power, but my efforts were ineffectual until a few months ago when she was

singing under the assumed name of 'Harding' at the Galaxy Theatre."

"I procured her the engagement," I said, "the day after I met her. Evidently the money with which she had provided herself on leaving you did not last her long, for she was quite destitute, in fact hungry, that night."

He groaned: "Well, I sent her a message, and spoke to her as she left the stage-door," he went on. "I entreated her to return to me, promising her everything that a woman could demand. She appeared to consider my proposal, and even asked me to come to see her the following morning at her rooms to arrange matters. When I parted from her, she kissed me, and putting her arms round my neck, said, 'I think I have been a mad-woman, Jack, but you shall never regret your goodness to me—never!' Infatuation as it may have been, I went back to my hotel happy."

"The same night," I put in, "she came to

me after you had left her, and offered to be my wife, since I wished it so ardently."

Everything was plain to me now, and his story no longer interested me, though—more I think as a relief to himself than to afford information to me—he rambled on.

It was Sigismund who put the question at last that had been floating vaguely in my own brain:

"May I ask, sir, if you propose to take the lady back?"

The man laughed bitterly:

"She is like my life," he said, "while I have one I must have the other. If she will consent, I will take her back with me to-morrow, in spite of everything." It seemed suddenly to recur to him that I had professed myself ignorant of her whereabouts.

"You will tell me where to find her—*now?*?" he asked.

"I told you the truth," I answered gloomily.

"I do not know! She deserted me because I refused to hide her away from you. She told me she was afraid of you—that you were making love to her."

"And she has gone?"

"Gone!" I said.

"Good God," cried the wretched man, "is this fatality!" He rose, as if unable to bear the strain of the interview any longer—indeed he had gone through something since he entered—and with a bow to me inquired:

"You will permit me to call to-morrow to ascertain if any tidings of her has reached you, I hope?"

"My dear sir," said I, "certainly." It was an embarrassing position, and I could not but be conscious he must hate me with a deadly hatred for all his courtesy of tone.

After he had gone, Sigismund and I drew a deep breath.

"You don't care for her any longer?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, telling the truth; for after you have loved a woman so passionately, it is not easy to pluck her image out of your heart at anybody's bidding, or for any list of reasons, however weighty. "I don't know," I repeated, "but at least everything is over between us. I have not the right now to keep her with me, nor has she apparently any intention of giving me the chance."

"What a devil she is!" said Frith. "She cares nothing for anyone. She has sacrificed her husband and she has sacrificed you, to her vanity. I could forgive a beautiful woman sinning from force of love, but this girl sins by calculation. She hasn't a heart at all!"

"Or the man who will waken the volcano has not appeared on the scene yet!" I said.

And in my inmost soul I could not help envying that man when he should come.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE morrow was as a rule my busiest day, but it was impossible to give my attention to my pupils under the circumstances, and I telegraphed to them all that I was unable to attend.

I did not rise till late, and it was while I was breakfasting that I heard a cab stop outside, and looking out of the window saw Felicia descend.

Had she come prepared to meet me, or to fetch her belongings under the impression that I should be out?

I waited breathlessly until the bell rang, and then opening the door myself seized her in my arms and drew her swiftly inside. Her dismay on seeing me left me no doubt that my second conjecture had been correct—she had come to remove her trunks.

“How do you do,” I said; “won’t you sit down?”

She glanced at me with a frown; my tone apparently was as great a surprise to her as my presence.

"You have returned at last then!" I observed; "pray sit down—you must be so tired."

"Tired?" she repeated mechanically.

"After your long walk! Or do you forget that you left me to take a walk."

"You are very witty!" she said sharply. "As it happens I have not come here to sit down, nor have I 'returned' in your sense! I have come to fetch my luggage."

"Thinking that this morning I should not be here to prevent you!"

She made no reply to that, so I went on—

"Well, I *am* here, but all the same you are perfectly free to take your luggage."

"What do you mean?" she asked slowly after a pause. "You think I owe an explanation to you?"

"Not at all," I said, "why should I?"

"You refused to protect me, and so I had no alternative but to protect myself."

"Quite so," I said.

"In a word," she exclaimed, "what do you want? I should say it is for *me* to feel aggrieved, not for *you!*"

"It certainly isn't for *me*," I owned, "and in proof of it, haven't I told you you may remove your things as soon as you like!"

"You won't prevent me?"

"By not so much as the lifting of a finger."

"You distrust me—you love me no longer?"

"My feelings for you have nothing to do with the matter. I shall not prevent you because I have not the right."

"Explain yourself," she said, turning pale.

"I have seen your husband," said I; and lit a cigarette.

I had subjugated her now if I had never done so before. Her eyes roved round the room as if she feared that he might spring

upon her, and her breath came and went in short pants.

"You need not be alarmed," I said, "he isn't here. But he has *been* here, and I know everything."

She moaned: "What is to become of me? Gerard, you won't give me up?"

"Do you want to stay with me?" I asked.

"I love you," she said, "I love you!"

"No," I declared, "you do not love me—you never did love me, Felicia—but you found me weak, and you could do whatever you liked with me."

"I love you," she insisted wildly, "I love you! Gerard, take me away from him! Don't you understand?—you have heard everything now—I can be punished, he can give me over to the law."

"There is no occasion for you to terrify yourself on that head," I said, "he is much too fond

of you! The only punishment that will overtake you is to be taken back to your home!"

"I will not go," she said, sitting erect and rigid, "I will not go to that dreary deadly life. I hate it—I hate *him*! This is the devotion you talked so much about—you will see me wrested from you without a struggle!"

"You talk like a madwoman," I cried. Her reproaches, her assurances that she loved me, idle as I knew them to be, went to my heart; I was beside myself. "How have you treated me? From first to last you have cared nothing for me—rarely even taken the trouble to pretend to do so. I have worshipped you, and in return for my worship you have given me indifference and deceit. If you *had* cared for me, you would have told me the truth, and then—"

"And then?" she murmured, looking down at me with her mysterious eyes.

"And then nothing should have parted us;" I exclaimed, "but now, even if I were prepared

to defy him, and to hold you still, you have given him a weapon for revenge by your own act. As you have said, you are a bigamist. You have made your own Nemesis, and you are helpless."

As I spoke the bell rang again, and a moment afterwards her husband entered.

I rose, and left them together.

A quarter of an hour later the door closed with a slam, and I understood that they had left the house. I went to the window, and watched them as they departed. The man's gaze dwelt on her with an affection that was pathetic—more, horrible—to see, and *Felicia was smiling tenderly in his face.*

I felt an impulse to scream out to him to beware of her—to take care!

A PRACTICAL JOKE.

A PRACTICAL JOKE.

It did not end happily, not for Harry Milford, that is to say; but it provided some excellent entertainment while it lasted, and is talked about in Wicketsfield to-day. We were all of us staying in Wicketsfield, and Milford had fallen a victim to the fascinations of Miss Norah Cardonnel; possibly because Wicketsfield is a dull little watering-place, and there was nothing else to do; possibly because he knew, or at least suspected, that she was worshipped by Stephen Lambsworthy, and Stephen Lambsworthy was his especial *bête-noire*.

I do not want to attribute unworthy motives to him: as a matter of fact, I liked him very

much; so let us give him the benefit of the doubt, and say he had grown to adore Miss Cardonnel because Miss Cardonnel was adorable. Anyhow it was plain that he was hopelessly in love, and though I had been honoured by Lambsworthy's confidences in the matter, I personally did not give much for his chances.

No two fellows could possibly have been more unlike than Stephen and Harry Milford. Harry, dashing, good-humoured, high-spirited, and handsome; Stephen, meek, nervous, and with next-to-nothing to say for himself. That both were very young was their only point of resemblance. I thought I had gauged Miss Cardonnel's character sufficiently to prophesy which of her admirers would be accepted, presuming they both proposed, and I confess I was startled when Milford displayed such strong irritation at the news that Lambsworthy was expected on the scene.

"Confound him!" he said, "what does he

want here? Can't he read in town just as well?" (We were supposed to be cramming for an exam., the three of us.) "What does he want to come bothering here for?"

"Well, you forget," I said, "Lambsworthy may be said to be the discoverer of Wicketsfield. At all events, neither you nor I would ever have come down here if it had not been that he was always talking about it. We should never even have known the Cardonnels but for him—remember that."

Milford growled. It was a fact that Lambsworthy had introduced us to them, and Harry never cared to be reminded of it.

"I don't want him," he said; "I don't get on with him; he is your friend, not mine, and he bores me. He is like a young lady, and he wears spectacles."

"He wears spectacles because he is short-sighted," I observed; "and as to being like a young lady, that is all rot, Milford! Anyhow,

if he is such a complete duffer, why need you mind his coming?"

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, sharply.

"You are annoyed at his arrival because you are afraid you may find your nose out of joint when he appears. I say if he is such a duffer why need you be alarmed?"

"Oh! pooh, pooh, rubbish!" said Milford. "*I* afraid of *Stephen Lambsworthy*? That is too rich!—that is really funny!" He made a loud noise, which I understood was meant to represent laughter. "You won't beat that if you talk for a month. Ha, ha, ha! Why, you don't mean to tell me you suppose for a single instant that a girl like Miss Cardonnel would seriously consider throwing herself away on a noodle like Lambsworthy?—a flabby, invertebrate, feeble, faltering bundle of nerves like Lambsworthy! *Good* Heavens! Afraid! Afraid of Lambsworthy! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, that's all right," I said; "I am glad

for your sake you are so confident. I assume, however, that you won't deny she encouraged him when we all came down here? Because I saw her with you, and I saw her with him, and I say she did!"

"She flirted with him," said Milford, tolerantly; "she flirted with him a little, yes! Why not? A girl must amuse herself. I do not complain of that."

"That's lucky," I replied; "singularly fortunate—for your own peace of mind. His letter says he will be with us to-morrow. He wants me to look out for a room for him."

"Cannot our landlady accommodate him?"

"No," I said, "she can't—not with a bedroom, that is! He will come in here to meals, of course, but he will have to sleep out of the house."

Milford shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that he was really indifferent as to the arrangements, and lounged away in the direc-

tion of the parade, where I have no doubt he expected to meet the Cardonnels, as was his daily custom.

I am ashamed to say that I neglected to engage a shake-down for Lambsworthy that afternoon, and as he arrived by an earlier train than the one he had mentioned on the morrow, it devolved upon him to go round and explore for himself after he got in.

However, he was quite cheerful when he returned to the cottage to supper; he had tea at his friends the Cardonnels in the meantime, and he told us he had secured a comfortable little room in the next street to us. He inquired at what hour we breakfasted, and promised us not to be late. He was so very lively and talkative, for Lambsworthy, that I felt the fair Norah had been agreeable in their interview, and I fancy Harry Milford had the same idea, for he scowled at his whisky and water darkly, and failed to chaff the other as brilliantly as was his wont.

I do not think that Milford and I had turned in more than a quarter of an hour when there came a violent beating at the street-door, and, peering out from my window, I saw Lambsworthy standing on the step, with his portmanteau in his hand, and his hat at the back of his head.

Wondering what he had come back for, I slipped on some things, and ran down and let him in.

"What is it?" called Milford, as I passed his room.

"It's Lambsworthy," I answered; "perhaps his landlady is out, and he can't get in."

It transpired that the house in which he had been going to sleep had been broken into. Lambsworthy was greatly upset. The landlady, who had been spending the evening out, and had only returned a few minutes before himself, had met him in the passage in a state of terrible consternation. Her bedroom-door, which she had locked before she left, had been forced open.

The hasp was wrenched off, and the wardrobe and chest of drawers had been rifled of all their contents.

“The room is in the most dreadful condition,” said Stephen; “and the woman, poor creature! is almost off her head. She said that she had never had such an experience before. I waited till a neighbour came in to keep her company—she was frightened to be left alone in the house—or I should have been back sooner. You must make me up a bed on the sofa for to-night, you fellows.”

“Why didn’t you stay there as you intended?” said Milford, who had joined us. “They haven’t stolen the beds, have they?”

“Well,” said Lambsworthy, slowly, “do you know, it is strange, but it didn’t occur to me. It gave me such a shock, the whole thing, it was so unexpected, that my only idea was to get away as soon as I could. And they have sent to the station, and the police will be here very soon.

There is no sign of how the burglars effected an entrance. It would really have been very unpleasant to sleep there."

"Funks!" said Milford under his breath; and, though I knew that Lambsworthy was not a coward, I could see myself his nerves were a little out of order, too.

If confirmation had been needed, I should have got it, as a banging came at the street-door again, and a shrill voice was heard asking if "Mr. Lambsworthy" lived here.

Stephen jumped up, and went out, coming back to say that it was the servant, who had been sent to inquire if he would kindly step round at eleven o'clock to-morrow, or if he would be here at the cottage, in case his evidence were wanted.

"I said I would go round and with pleasure," he explained. "But I do not see what 'evidence' I can give."

"Nor can anybody else see it either!" re-

turned Milford. "My dear fellow, is it possible you don't understand what the girl came for really? She was sent to see if you had given a false address or not. The police are suspecting *you*."

I thought Lambsworthy would have fallen.

"Suspecting *me*?" he ejaculated.

"Certainly; very natural, too. You go to a house, a perfect stranger. You engage a room; are furnished with a latch-key; and the same evening, while the landlady is out, a burglary takes place—a burglary never having occurred there before. If they had found no 'Mr. Lambsworthy' living here, there would have been a warrant issued for your arrest."

"Do you think that is so, old fellow?" asked Stephen, appealing to me with big eyes.

I admitted that it sounded probable. I, however, added that his respectability was a very easy matter to prove, even if it should still be doubted, and, after he had regained his composure, we im-

provided a shake-down for him on the couch, and we all retired.

How can I describe the development? Lambsworthy went round to the scene of the late commotion at eleven o'clock next morning, as he had promised; and, when he came back, he was in the nearest approach to a rage that I had ever seen him in.

"Old chap, the wretch does suspect me!" he exclaimed; "Milford was right! She gave me my deposit back, and said, if it was all the same to me, she would rather not let the room. Of course I said I did not mind: and, as she was rather inclined to be high-handed, I added that, on the whole, I did not know that I should fancy bringing my luggage there. I said it was 'rather a dangerous proceeding for a lady to go out, and leave a house to take care of itself.' And what do you think she answered?"

"I cannot guess, Lambsworthy."

"She said, 'It is a good deal more dangerous

to take a lodger without a reference.' I told her if she dared to hint at her infernal suspicions to her neighbours I'd have her up for slander, and so I will! I never heard of such a thing!"

He was in a state of great excitement all day, recounting the affair over and over again to Seymour, and Miss Cardonnel, and myself. I am bound to say that I got a little tired of it, but Milford roared with laughter every time, and I caught a look in Norah Cardonnel's eyes that augured badly for him in consequence. If nobody else was sympathetic, the young lady was.

Harry Milford disappeared during the afternoon—went for a long tramp, he said—and I had the indignant Lambsworthy all to myself till he returned.

When he did come back, he said he had noticed a card with "Apartments to Let" on it in a window just round the corner, and suggested to Stephen obtaining a room in the house.

"This looks a good, substantial kind of domi-

cile," he said; "one not likely to be burglarised! Wouldn't do for the next place you choose to be broken into, you know, Lambsworthy; that would be really damning!"

Lambsworthy, who shuddered at the bare idea, thanked him, and sallied forth to see if he could arrange.

He came back and told us he had settled.

"But," he said, "do you know, I'm nervous! What Milford said is true, and it *might* happen that the same kind of thing occurred there! What *should* I do if there were a robbery there, too, to-night? Why, I should be taken up; I am certain I should!"

"Sure thing!" said Milford, exploding afresh. "Console yourself by remembering that coincidences like that don't happen!"

He was very amiable to Lambsworthy that evening, pressing him to try his tobacco after supper, and shaking hands with him warmly when they said "Good-night." He, however, did not

want to go to bed after the other's departure; he said he should sit up and smoke, and begged me to do likewise.

"It's quite early," he said, "not eleven. Sit up with me, and we'll turn in, if you want to, as soon as I've finished this pipe."

I consented. As a matter of fact, he had never been better company, and I was just laughing heartily at a story he was telling me when—

"Good Heavens!" I exclaimed, turning pale, "that *can't* be Lambsworthy come back again to-night? Who is it?"

"Better open the door and see!" replied Milford, philosophically.

It was being beaten wildly as I bolted into the passage. Another instant, and my worst fears were verified. Lambsworthy stood before me with chattering teeth, the portmanteau—the accursed portmanteau—by his side.

"Not—?"

“Burglars?” he gasped; “yes! For the Lord’s sake, give me some whisky, old man, I’m feeling ill!”

He followed me into the sitting-room and fell into a chair.

“It is the same thing,” he muttered, “just the same thing! The house had been broken into when I got there, and no clue—no clue. The man showed me the room; everything scattered and upside down. Milford, I shall go mad!”

He seemed in measurable distance of it—even Milford was concerned. It certainly seemed like fatality! Wherever the poor fellow went there was a burglary; his name would be on the tongues of all Wicketsfield directly. There was never anything known like it.

We gave him whisky, and more whisky, and, after that, whisky again. Whether he slept when we left him at last on the couch, I do not know, but his face was as white as a sheet in the morning, and when Mr. and Mrs. Cardonnel called,

with their daughter, they were aghast at his appearance.

"It is perfectly extraordinary!" exclaimed Norah, "and as to the police, who can allow such things—" Words failed her to express her contempt for the stupidity of the police.

"I tell you what," said Mr. Cardonnel, "I should go down to the station myself if I were you—I will go with you. Confound it all, we will go at once. Something must be done, and without delay!"

I noticed that in a moment Milford was almost as pale as Lambsworthy; I was even prepared to hear him offer an objection.

"I should not do that, sir, if—if I may presume to advise," he said. "I should wait a day or two."

"And why, sir?" demanded Mr. Cardonnel, peremptorily; "why should we wait an hour?"

"Yes," echoed Norah, haughtily; "why should we wait five minutes, Mr. Milford?"

"We will go now!" cried Stephen; "I thank you for the suggestion. We will go at once, and I will see the inspector myself."

Milford sat playing nervously with an ash-tray on the table. He seemed to be trying to speak, and to have lost his voice. At last he said jerkily, and with an attempt at a laugh:—

"To tell you the truth, everybody, you are spoiling a practical joke of mine. Lambsworthy was so very concerned at the first burglary, that I thought how funny it would be if the same thing occurred in the next house he tried. The landlord is my tobacconist, and—well, there *wasn't* a burglary last night at all; it was just arranged between us for a lark!—er—that's all."

If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget Miss Cardonnel's look of contempt as he finished speaking; and I don't think Milford will forget it either. Her papa's violent opinion of practical jokes and jokers paled into insignificance beside it, and Lambsworthy's good-natured assurance

that "no harm was done" fell perfectly unheeded in the room.

Yes; Norah became Mrs. Stephen Lambsworthy, and refused to invite Milford to the wedding. Whether affairs would have ended like that in the ordinary course, I don't know; but that is how they did end, and Milford, at least, has always been convinced that he has only himself to thank for it.

POOR CECIL.

POOR CECIL.

CAPTAIN PIERPOINT was perturbed—as perturbed as Jimmy Pierpoint could be. He was sitting in an armchair at the Regent Club awaiting the arrival of his only son. He (the Captain) was habitually late for his appointments, but his son was even less punctual, and from time to time he re-read a letter he had received from his hopeful, and stifled an oath.

It must be conceded that his vexation was not without excuse. Pierpoint was not a rich man. He owed more money than he liked to think about. He was frequently troubled about his rent. His tradespeople wrote him rude communications. His chronic condition was in his own

phrase, "up to his neck." Yet he had been a good father; now his own son was making him an ungrateful, a maddening return.

The clock struck four; Cecil was an hour late. The Captain got up, and strolled irascibly to the window. At the same moment a hansom stopped at the door, and a young gentleman, attired in the costume required by the West End at four o'clock in the afternoon, sprang out, and mounted the steps.

Need the costume be particularised? He wore a frock-coat, varnished boots, a pink carnation, grey suède gloves, and a silk hat for which he owed twenty-five shillings. His parent, who was shabby, groaned in his soul.

"Well," he said, as his heir entered the room, "so you have come!"

"I'm awfully sorry to be late!" exclaimed the new arrival cordially. "I didn't get your wire till half an hour ago. Where shall we sit?"

"Sit here," said the Captain. "What is all

this nonsense you have written me, Cecil? You are not serious, I suppose?"

The young man flushed.

"I am perfectly serious," he returned. "Of course I know my determination won't please you, and—and I regret it; but I have considered the step very carefully—pray believe that—and I am convinced it is for the best. As I wrote you——"

"I wired you directly I had your letter," said his father. "It is an absurd letter, a ridiculous letter! You must have been out of your mind to have written it."

"Why?"

"Why! Grant me patience!" He surveyed the costume before referred to. "How much do you owe, Cecil? What means have you got of paying for your coat or your trousers, or your button-hole? *I* can't do it! My present capital is fourteen shillings! You are engaged to a pretty girl, a charming girl—a girl with fifty thousand

pounds and expectations—and yet you deliberately, *deliberately* tell me it is ‘for the best’ that you shouldn’t marry her!”

“I don’t love her,” said Mr. Pierpoint junior. “Our engagement was a folly, and—and——”

“And its rupture would be madness,” declared his father. Heavens above! what can you do? Can you make a living? Are you fit for any single occupation under the sun? When it is known that your engagement to Miss Summerville is broken off, have you a five-pound note towards appeasing the creditors that will swarm about you? And what is the matter with her, I should like to know? Is it such a hardship to marry a beautiful girl who is devoted to you? Is there any ass of your acquaintance who would throw her over, do you think, situated as you are yourself? Really, Cecil, I don’t want to lose my temper, but this imbecility of yours is enough to try the patience of a saint! Ada Summerville! One would think she was an ogress!”

Cecil lit a cigarette, and puffed at it moodily.

"I knew you would take it to heart," he said; "but, after all, every fellow must be the best judge of his own life."

"Bosh!" said the Captain, "bosh, my dear boy! Your judgment hasn't brought you very far, I believe? And your judgment will never provide you with an income. You must marry or starve, to put it brutally. That's the plain truth!"

"Other fellows——"

"Other fellows have nothing to do with it! Come, you liked Miss Summerville when I introduced you to her. If she had been a pauper, you were equal to falling violently in love with her. What has happened to change your sentiments with regard to her since?"

Cecil was silent.

"Isn't she pretty?"

"Yes, she's all right."

"And amiable?"

"So, so," opined his son.

"Have you ever seen a girl more desirable in every way?"

"Rather!"

"You have?"

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Who?"

"I don't think you know her. She——"

Captain Pierpoint dropped his cigar at the imminent risk of burning his waistcoat:

"Cecil," he ejaculated, "you are in love with someone else! Good Heavens! I might have guessed it!"

The cat was out of the bag. This, then, was the explanation of the dismaying change of front.

"You are in love with somebody else," he repeated after a pause. "And, of course, she hasn't a halfpenny?"

"She is not an heiress, no."

"Has she got anything at all?"

"Not a blessed sixpence."

"It only wanted this," murmured the Captain, lifting his eyes up to heaven. "This is the last straw! Very well, my lad, marry her! Throw over Miss Summerville, and marry a girl with nothing instead! I have no more to say—argument is wasted on you; you want a keeper. When you blow your brains out, and leave seven children on the parish, you'll remember this afternoon. Waiter, bring me some brandy and a third of a small soda." He cast himself back in the chair with folded hands. "May I ask if the wedding day is fixed?"

"I have not spoken to Miss Summerville yet," replied Cecil sulkily. "I thought it was only due to you to consult you first."

"I thank you. That was very good of you."

"And, of course, Miss Stapleton and I are ostensibly nothing to each other at present. I hope I have too much honour to make love to one girl while I'm still engaged to another," added the boy. "Only I am very fond of Nellie Stapleton,

and I don't care a rap for Miss Summerville; and —and that's all about it."

"Who," demanded the other, "who *is* Miss Stapleton? Where did you find her?"

"I met them at Brighton. Her mother is a widow."

"Do they let apartments there?"

"She is a lady; of course she is a lady—what do you suppose? Her father—the widow's husband—was in the Service. He was a Major in the Blues. And they are tremendously well connected, too. They go everywhere."

The elder man shrugged his shoulders, and rose. There was really little more to say. If his son were fool enough to jilt a rich woman, and effect a preposterous engagement to a poor one, why, he would have to do it. The position was an obvious one, and no amount of remonstrance would make it any plainer.

"Well," he said, "I have told you my opinion, my dear boy, and I can only pray you may come

to your senses before it is too late. Let me hear from you when you have decided what you mean to do."

"I *have* decided," answered young Pierpoint. "Good-day, father."

He picked up his cane and departed, and the Captain, watching him, sighed.

Now, though he had expressed his determination so resolutely, Cecil Pierpoint was only quixotic while compared with his progenitor, and when opposition was withdrawn, and he was left to his own devices, he was by no means devoid of a nice appreciation of the loaves and fishes of life. It was one thing to sit down on impulse and write a slap-dash letter to his father, and quite another—the effervescence subsiding—to go to Miss Summerville in cool blood and renounce his pretensions to her hand. Also, though he had asserted that Nellie Stapleton and he were ostensibly nothing to each other as yet, the statement was only correct up to a certain point. He

had not told her in so many words that he wanted to marry her; she had not in so many words avowed her affection for him; but he was paying her very marked attention. And if he should come to the conclusion that his romance was impracticable after all, he would be compelled to have a conversation with her which would not be altogether agreeable.

He was a good deal worried, Mr. Cecil, as he took his way from the Regent Club to the rooms which he honoured by his presence, and he felt that he was, as he expressed it, in a devil of a dilemma. He really did not know which would be more distasteful—the confession to Nellie that he was an engaged man, or the announcement to his *fiancée* that he desired to be free.

And his father's words had left their mark on his reflections. "Seven children on the parish"—coarse, but descriptive! Positively, upon the whole, he feared that he would have to resign himself to his destiny—feared that the inevitable

unpleasantness in some shape would have to be the farewell to Nellie, and not the adieu to Miss Summerville.

But, like his father, he was not keen to embrace the unpleasant. There was no immediate hurry, he opined. He would wait a few days—let things go on as they were. Besides, that would give him time to make up his mind. *Festina lente*—it was an excellent motto.

One thing, however, he overlooked in this application of an adage to exigencies of his own position—he overlooked the fact that he was neglecting the heiress, and that heiresses are not unnaturally exacting. It was dangerous. He called on the Stapletons, went out with the Stapletons, all the time intending, when a favourable opportunity arose, to mention as casually as possible to Nellie that he was somebody else's property. And when he saw Miss Summerville, Miss Summerville was on each occasion cooler;

while little pauper Nellie's manner grew tender and less formal every day.

Then came the moment when he saw he must acknowledge the truth to her without hesitation.

They were together in the garden of the Regent's Park villa, with which he had become so familiar. He had an uncomfortable misgiving that Mrs. Stapleton had left them alone that he might have the chance to speak words precisely the opposite of what he had to say.

Nellie's head was uncovered. The breeze fluttered her hair becomingly; he thought he had never seen her look so bewitching, so eminently desirable. She stopped to pick a rose from one of the little trees that fringed the path. Did she, too, expect a proposal? Good Heavens, what a mess he was in! Why had he left it all so late?

"I have been reading the book you sent me, Mr. Pierpoint," she remarked. "It is beautiful."

"Yes, it is pretty, isn't it?" he returned. "Of

course, it is only a love-story, but I thought you'd like it."

She glanced at him archly.

"How contemptuously you say that—'only a love-story'! *You* are above all such folly, I suppose you mean."

He laughed to mask confusion.

"Now, you are chaffing me again, Miss Stapleton. I don't know why you find such a pleasure in making me look a fool."

"Oh!" she exclaimed protestingly, "how dare you say such a thing to me! How unkind of you! I only meant——"

"What did you mean?"

"I don't know," she said.

Her attention was concentrated on the rose again. He decided to take the fence without further shilly-shallying.

"I wanted you to be extra nice to me to-day, in point of fact," he said, "because I have an important piece of news to give you."

"Really?"

"Yes, tremendously important. I—— We are such good friends, I want——" The rose was falling in pieces on the gravel. The sight did not encourage him. He gulped and blurted out his next words desperately: "I am going to be married, Miss Stapleton."

It was probably only five seconds, but it seemed an age before he heard her voice again. Yet, was it hers?—it was different from anything he had heard from her lips.

"I congratulate you!" she said icily. "Have I met the lady?"

"I don't know—I think not. Miss Summer-ville, her name is. I—I have often been going to tell you."

She was bold enough now. She lifted her eyes to him, and, if it may be said of a young lady, *stared* at him in disdainful surprise.

"You have 'often' been going to tell me! Do you mean it is an engagement of long standing?"

"Well, yes," he stammered; "that is—it depends what you call 'long.' Four months, I believe; something like it."

She contemplated him in a moment's silence again, and then, slowly turning, made her way beside him back into the house.

Mrs. Stapleton was doing fancy-work in a basket chair by the window. Her daughter paused in front of her. "Mamma," she said, "you must offer Mr. Pierpoint your heartiest felicitations. What do you think? He's engaged to be married, and we never knew!"

Her tone was admirable; only her eyes betrayed the mortification she was suffering. But Mrs. Stapleton was less adroit.

"Engaged?" she said in a gasp. "Oh, I'm sure I congratulate you, Mr. Pierpoint, though it is strange you should have kept it a secret all this time, I must say!"

He shuffled uneasily. The servant came in with a message, and Nellie withdrew. Mrs.

Stapleton put her fancy-work down, and gazed at him reproachfully.

"Yes, I must say it is strange, Mr. Pierpoint," she repeated, "very strange! Is it usual, may I ask, for an engaged young man to pay his addresses to another girl in the way you have been doing to my daughter?"

"My 'addresses'? Oh, surely," he stammered, "I have not been guilty of that? Don't say I have behaved badly, Mrs. Stapleton, or I shall hate myself."

"I do say it!" she insisted. "You have given Nellie every reason to believe you were fond of her. I am very, very much astonished at your conduct."

He fingered his hat desperately, the colour coming and going in his face.

"I am *fond* of her," he confessed, with a jerk. "If I were free—"

"I understand you were already engaged when you made her acquaintance?"

"I mean if I were free to marry for love, Mrs. Stapleton! I am poor; Nellie—the dearest girl in the world—is not rich either. You would never have consented to her waiting for me even if I begged you to do so."

"Pardon me," said the old lady, "I should have considered my child's wishes paramount. However, we need not discuss that—it is too late."

There was an inquiry in her tone, and momentarily he was tempted to take advantage of it. The next instance common-sense reasserted itself, though. His destiny was Ada Summerville and her shekels. He sighed, and put out his hand.

"Please make my adieux for me," he said, miserably. "Good-day, Mrs. Stapleton. Think as well of me as you can."

He was wretched. He had lost the girl he loved, and the girl he was going to marry looked

more than ever unattractive in his eyes. He was to have dined at the Summervilles' house to-night, but he felt that the ordeal was beyond him, and telegraphed an elaborate excuse. His father was in Paris, and so he was even debarred the comfort of parental approbation. He thought he would write and tell him that all was over between Nellie Stapleton and himself; but, after all, what did it matter? He dined in solitude at the club, and went back to his rooms at one o'clock.

A letter was lying on the mantelpiece, and he recognised Miss Summerville's writing. What had she to say? He tore the envelope open.

"DEAR MR. PIERPOINT,—It has become more and more plain to me of late that our engagement has been a mistake on both sides. I think *you* have felt it too? In any case I am quite sure that I misread my own sentiments, and I realise that I have no alternative now but to claim my

freedom and restore you yours. Pray do not make any attempt, even if you desire to do so, to alter my resolution, which I have arrived at carefully, and which my parents approve. I am sure we shall always be good friends, and I beg you to take it literally when I sign myself—Quite sincerely yours,

“ADA SUMMERVILLE.”

He dropped into a chair, half dazed. Twelve hours earlier he knew he would have read it with relief—the knotty problem would have been cut for him unaided, and he would have been spared the trouble of decision—but now his one emotion was overwhelming disgust at the malignity of the fate that was sporting with him.

He put the note into an envelope, and directed it to Jimmy Pierpoint's hotel in Paris, without a line of comment. He regretted that his father was not in town, in order that his own aggravation might have been mollified by the sight of the

other's. He grinned savagely in picturing what his face would be like when he read it, and for two days waited with undisguised interest for the page of lamentation which he was sure would arrive.

To his surprise the Captain arrived instead. He came into his room on the third morning, while he was breakfasting.

Only that it could not be possible under the circumstances, one would have said the Captain was in high good humour. His eyes twinkled, and he twirled his moustache in his most complacent fashion.

"Good-morning," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm as well as can be expected," returned his son; "neither better nor worse. You got my letter?"

"I got Miss Summerville's letter, if that's what you mean, yes. Well, I've news for you, Cecil, you lucky dog!"

Why he should be called a lucky dog, and by his father of all people in the world, called for explanation, young Pierpoint felt.

"I don't follow you," he said.

"Ah! Well, listen to this, my boy, and you'll say a little thanksgiving. Some people are born lucky and some are born rich. *You* were born lucky, marvellously lucky—there's no doubt about that! You need not bother about Miss Summer-ville's affront—do you hear?—it doesn't matter a straw."

"Not matter?"

"Not a bit. And you can marry the other girl as soon as you like!"

"Are you dreaming, father?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed his parent. "I thought I'd startle you! Cecil, I have just learnt for a fact—for a fact, mind you—that at her uncle's death your Miss Stapleton comes in for a hundred thousand at the least. Propose to

her; marry her. Good Heavens! what's the matter?"

But Cecil Pierpoint could not answer at once. He sat staring at his father with open mouth, dismay tearing at his heart.

NOT SO BAD AFTER ALL.

NOT SO BAD AFTER ALL.

It was a thriving, prosperous shop, with plate-glass windows, and electric light, in a big thoroughfare. Once Mr. Harding had been "in quite a small way" it was said. There was even a legend about his having begun life on his own account with a barrow; but to-day "Harding's" brooked no opposition. "Harding's" was a landmark, something by which pedestrians might be directed—"Just past Harding's; before you come to Harding's; on the opposite side of the way." The small dealers trembled at the name of Harding's; and well they might. The meat there was a penny a pound lower than the neighbouring butchers could afford to offer it. The price of

Harding's bread came near to sending the adjacent bakers to the workhouse. His boots and his drapery and his fancy goods were displayed at figures which struck terror and dismay to his smaller rivals' hearts. And Harding did not care—not a curse. The only thing in the world he did care for, besides money, was his daughter. He had one child. Mathew Harding was large and fat; Sybil was lithe and graceful. Mr. Harding was plain, with keen avaricious little eyes. Sybil was the loveliest girl you would be likely to see in a long walk, and her eyes looked like pieces of Heaven's own blue. Mr. Harding was hated; Sybil was beloved. Nevertheless, they were fond of each other. The father showed the best side of him to the child he worshipped, and Sybil thought him in reality the most generous and misjudged of men, until one day she fell in love. She fell in love with Charlie Boroughs, son of Boroughs the stationer, close by; and Mr. Harding told her that, before a daughter of his should

marry the son of a pettifogging little tradesman, who could not get credit for a hundred pounds, he would see her dead and in her grave.

Perhaps in her quiet way she inherited some of her father's tenacity of purpose! the tenacity of purpose that had reared "Harding's" from a barrow—for she refused to give Charlie up, in spite of everything, and declared she would wait for him till he was able to claim her.

"I mean it," she said.

"And *I* mean it, too," said Mathew, grimly. "I will see you dead first. Mind that, my lady."

They were in the parlour—the room they always sat in of an evening—one each side of the cheery fire. The whisky bottle was by Harding's elbow, ready for his nightcap, and the kettle, and the lemon, and the sugar. He always took a glass of grog with his last pipe, and he commenced to boil the water now, affecting to dismiss the subject finally. The girl got up, and

crossed over to him, and dropped on the hassock by his feet.

"Father," she begged; "be kinder. I love him!"

"Pshaw!" said Mathew, irritably. "Love him! You will forget him easily enough. There are plenty of young men in the world, and young men with means."

"I shall not forget him, nor will he forget me. Father, it is my life, remember, that you are disposing of. Don't let us quarrel, you and I. Consider!"

Mr. Mathew Harding brought his fist down on the table with a bang that set everything jingling.

"I have spoken my last word," he cried. "You shan't have him! By Heaven you shan't, —there! If you marry him without my consent may you live to want bread, to have starving children, to see them die in a ditch. I've done!"

She got up and faced him with clenched teeth.

"I will marry him," she said, "and that is *my* last word!" And she went out of the room.

He sat staring at the kettle on the fire with knitted brows. He knew she was determined. He knew the young fellow loved her. Old Boroughs too, had come pleading to him that very day. How could he prevent it—how? He puffed at his pipe more and more slowly, pondering on plans to separate them, and avert all danger. That he was doing a cruel thing—that his objections were mean and contemptible—he did not realise for a moment. He only thought, and thought; and at last he had an idea.

From that very day Mr. Harding set himself the task of under-selling old Boroughs in every commodity. His plate-glass windows were flooded with stationery, and inkstands, and albums of views. When poor old Boroughs despairingly dropped the price of an article to sixpence, down went its duplicate in Harding's to fourpence-halfpenny. No sooner did Boroughs ticket it at fourpence-halfpenny, than Harding lowered his

figure again. The money he lost in this competition he made up in other departments, so it did not matter to him greatly, but to Charlie's father it meant something very serious. It meant ruin—and it came.

The old man died of the disgrace. He had looked his neighbours in the face, owing no one all his life, and bankruptcy was a shame he was unable to bear. He died, and was buried, and his son, who had been heir to a respectable business, went into a solicitor's office as copying clerk with no other prospect in life save that offered by his own brains.

And Sybil went out of her father's house, having spoken to him words that neither he nor she would ever forget.

"You have killed the father of the man I love," she said. "His death is at your door! I will not remain under your roof: I will not wear the dresses that you give me, or eat the food that you provide. I would rather starve with Charlie

than live in the greatest luxury your wealth could procure. After what you have done I owe you nothing, neither obedience nor respect, and this is our good-bye."

Oh, he raved! He stormed at her and swore, but she was obdurate.

"It is out of the question," she repeated. "When I think of your wickedness my blood curdles. I will not—I cannot remain."

Old Harding had precipitated the very thing that he had schemed to make impossible; he had married his daughter to Charlie Boroughs. But instead of their marrying and being comfortable in a modest little home, the young couple now started life together in a garret, where Charlie brought fifteen shillings a week, and Sybil spent the day answering the "Wanted" advertisements.

It was by no means soon that she was able to procure any work. The labour market is so overstocked in every department that it is difficult enough for trained hands to find employment,

and Sybil was not trained. At last, however, she secured a post in a photographer's where she had to keep the books, and answer the letters, and receive people when they came, and drew a weekly salary of a pound.

This helped them considerably, and kept the wolf from the door for nearly a year, but then something happened which necessitated her relinquishing the place. A baby was born.

The child thrived, but the mother hung between life and death for three weeks. She might have obtained better care and attention in a hospital, but she had dreaded going to one; and, in the top bedroom of a side-street, at the mercy of a downstairs lodger, she lay moaning all day, while Charlie was breaking his heart at the office.

He pawned everything he could; he denied himself necessities, so as to provide her with proper nourishment. But fifteen shillings will not go far in the direction of a doctor's bill, and prescriptions, and little delicacies; especially when

the rent has to come out of it too, and Charlie watched her sinking with a panic in his soul, and great tears rolling down his cheeks.

Yes; Sybil was dying—part of her father's wish had been fulfilled; she was dying of want—and only the wife of a year! One evening she opened her eyes, and lay looking at her husband, thinking.

“Charlie!”

He went across to her, trying to look hopeful, trying to hide his horrible despair.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“When I'm gone, Charlie, who will take care of baby?”

“Sybil, don't!”

“But I must,” she persisted, weakly. “Lift her up, Charlie. Let me see her. Poor little baby! Poor, poor husband! Kiss me, Charlie. Kiss me while I know you.”

A sob almost tore his chest in two. It was fearful to feel himself so powerless. He wrung

his hands, and then—. There might be time to save her still. His own pride, his own dignity were nothing to him at such an hour. What if Mr. Harding would forgive?

It was late that night when Mathew Harding and Charlie Boroughs mounted the narrow staircase that led to her room together. The young man had pleaded long and passionately; the old one had stood cold and obdurate until at last the restraint that he was putting on himself had broken down, and he had burst out crying violently.

His child was dying—Sybil was dying! Remorse rent his soul! In a sudden flash of light he saw himself as he was—the murderer of her husband's father, the cause of twelve months' suffering and misery to herself.

"May God forgive me!" gasped Mathew Harding. "Take me to her, quick!"

To his frenzy and repentance it had seemed that the cab would never reach the humble

street, but now he was there Boroughs opened the door and they passed in.

The lamp had gone out, and at first he could not see her in the obscurity. Then he discovered a figure lying on a narrow bed—the figure of his child.

“Strike a light,” he said hoarsely; “for God’s sake, man, a light.”

The husband, too, was eager to see her, and they bent over the pillow side by side. Her hands were lying on the quilt, and Harding touched one gently. The next instant he gave a horrible cry. The hand was cold.

He fell on his knees, gasping and shuddering. Boroughs flung himself by the bed in an abandonment of terror, trying to detect the beating of her heart. There was no pulsation—no breath issued from the white lips. She was quite dead!

And when they thought of the child it was dead too, lying there beside her! Mathew Harding’s penitence had come too late. Not even the

little one, to whom he might have atoned for his treatment of her mother, was spared to his agony. He had raised himself to look at her, when Charlie's gesture warned him of the truth, and now the room seemed rocking round him. The walls and the ceiling were meeting, and the floor heaved. He threw up his arms to Heaven: something snapped in his heart, and he woke.

The kettle was boiling over, the whisky and the sugar and the lemon were still waiting his pleasure on the table, and Sybil had come back into the room.

Then Mr. Mathew Harding sat up and wiped his wet eyes, and spoke to her as soon as he could find his voice.

"I've had a bad dream, Sybil," he said; "a very bad dream, and—and if you like me to go round with you to tell old Boroughs and Charlie that I consent, I will, dear. You shall have him!"

MY FIRST SWEETHEART.

MY FIRST SWEETHEART.

SHE was sixteen, and the entire affair was unconventional. Ah! we knew how to make love when I was a young man! "Love laughs at locksmiths" had an application then, I can tell you. Now, the proverb might just as well be eliminated from the language, for anything it means. Those were the days of the postchaise and Gretna Green that I am talking about—would they had survived! their abolition was death to the art of courtship in this country. "Cervantes smiled Spain's chivalry away," said Byron. Yes; and deposing the Blacksmith was the end of romance with us. That has nothing to do with the story? Well, it

is a digression—authors are allowed to digress—wait a minute.

I had gone down into the country for some fishing. I need not mention the real name of the place: I will call it Troutmere. I had engaged a couple of rooms in a very pretty cottage, and on the night of my arrival, when I lit my pipe, and sampled the whisky that the landlady had ordered in on my account, I told myself I had made an entirely satisfactory choice.

Mrs. Pedder, when I expressed my approval, curtsied with gratification. She said she hoped I should not be “worried” by the piano, or singing in the next house. It was a big house—a young ladies’ school. She dared say I should see the young ladies, across the walk, taking their exercise in the garden.

I allayed her misgivings. I answered that I had come down for fish, and was not concerned with young ladies. I said I had very little doubt I should leave the place without being definitely

conscious that a school existed. Blind fool! I little suspected what Fate was holding in store for me.

The next morning I saw the prettiest girl I have ever seen in my life.

Let me try to describe her. She was demure—I think that is the word of all others to put first about her—she was demure, all excepting her blue-grey eyes, which had a dare-devil light in them that sent a thrill into me the instant I met their gaze. Her frock was such a frock as a schoolgirl at fifteen or sixteen might becomingly wear, and with her tawny hair hanging in a mass down her back, and a big straw hat saving her little tip-tilted nose from freckles, she was walking up and down the garden with a book in her hands, presumably learning a lesson.

I was sitting at the open window when I saw her first, and though I had been at the point of descending to breakfast, I now delayed doing so,

waiting for her to turn—and perhaps look up at me—again.

She did. She shot me another glance, and then a faint smile curved her mouth, and she provokingly raised the book a shade higher, screening her face from my view.

Certainly I had made no effort to conceal my admiration. Perhaps I had disconcerted her?

No! Just then a bell rang in the house; it was evidently a summons for her to go in. She lifted her eyes to me boldly for fully a second. She read all that my own were capable of telling her. Then a blush mounted to her cheeks, and she went slowly indoors.

I sat down to my breakfast—in love. I was young, I was impressionable—the oddness of being fascinated by a girl at school may not have been without its charm to me—and yet I say it with conviction, I was in love. That afternoon I returned from the river early, in the hopes of catching a glimpse of her afresh. In this, how-

ever, I was doomed to disappointment; but I need not add that I was up betimes, and at my window, the following morning.

The previous programme was repeated. She came out; we exchanged long gazes; she went in, recalled by the clamour of the bell. At other times during the day I saw more girls strolling up and down; but not her. She appeared only to come out in the morning. Every morning I waited for her; every morning this silent courtship, if it can be called so, continued. So for a week.

At the end of the week I threw her a letter. It was dexterously done. Just as she was re-entering the house, it fell at her feet.

She picked it up. My heart was beating furiously. I did not see her open it, but I awaited developments in a fever. I had ascertained from Mrs. Pedder that on Sundays the schoolmistress accompanied all her pupils to the village church. Inside my letter was a rose, and I had begged

my Incognita to wear it during service, if my admiration was not objectionable to her.

Guess the emotions with which I went to church that Sunday. She had it in her dress!

“And suddenly, sweetly, my heart beat stronger,
And thicker, until I heard no longer
The dilettante, snowy-banded, delicate-handed priest in-
tone.”

A deep blush rewarded me as I looked across at her in the pew—an expression that was ravishing. I would have given a fortune to have taken her in my arms on the spot—I was now too passionately attracted by her to find amusement in prolonged preliminaries. Precipitation, nevertheless, would ruin everything, I understood. Before I could obtain an interview, another note was necessary. And even then, how would she answer? I confess I was baffled, but I was underestimating woman's natural wit.

I cannot remember the phrasing of my second epistle, which I projected to her in the same way,

but I can recall her reply word for word. I had told her that I adored her; that life without her were a blank too awful to contemplate; and I begged her to give me an opportunity of speaking to her without delay. Her answer ran thus:—

“If you are really serious, be in our garden at nine o’clock this evening, under the apple-tree, by the duck-pond. It was very wicked of you to write to me.

CLARE DENTON.”

I received this communication at a time when I had given up all hopes of it for the present—that is to say, an hour before the one for which the tryst was fixed. And how do you think I got it? I was in my parlour, smoking, when I heard a tapping at the window-pane, and looking out, I found myself signed to by a messenger of love, in the shape of a carroty servant-girl, who was, it transpired, the kitchenmaid at the “select seminary.”

"Miss Denton gave me this for you, sir," she whispered, huskily. "Oh, thank you, sir! And Miss Denton, sir, said as you might make bold to trust me—allus."

She disappeared into the night, with a slightly amorous glance on her own account, I fancied, and I was left to consult my watch a dozen times in every five minutes.

"Carrots" was waiting for me at the garden door when nine o'clock struck at last, and I went forward excitedly. Clare was not there. A quarter of an hour passed; and still she did not come. I was tormenting myself with a thousand terrors, when the glint of her dress showed among the trees, and the next instant I had taken her by both her hands.

"How can I thank you enough?" I exclaimed. "Oh! if you knew how I have longed to speak to you!"

"It is all very wrong," she murmured, con-

fusedly; "I—I should get into dreadful trouble if I were found out."

She was more bashful, and also more childish, in those first few moments together than I had pictured her; but less beautiful—not. I made love to her in my most ardent vein. I told her, and it was perfectly true, that since the first morning I had seen her she had occupied all my thoughts.

"I am infatuated with you!" I declared. "You are adorable! Clare—may I call you Clare?—now we have met we must never be strangers any more. I want to make you my wife—to carry you off, and never to part from you. Darling! I will risk everything to see you like this again and again; but, as you say, there is the danger to yourself. Don't make me woo you too long. Clare, run off with me to-morrow—well, next day, then—and you shall see what a devoted husband I will be!"

"Oh!" she faltered, shrinking.

“Does it frighten you? Sweetheart, you need not fear. I will tell you all about myself—you may trust me implicitly. You do care for me a little, don’t you?”

“How can I care for you,” she said, “when we hardly know each other yet?”

“Love,” I cried, enthusiastically, “surmounts all the petty barriers and artificialities of society. *I* knew *you* the day your eyes met mine first, and showed me the exquisite soul behind them. Clare, say you like me—do!”

She admitted that she did like me—a little. But she repeated that it was all “very wrong,” and that she was “ashamed.” Then she began to cry—and I put my arms round her and comforted her. I quitted her with an arrangement for another interview the next evening, and at this she was more collected—also colder. How she managed the matter I am unable to say, but I met her thus, and nothing interfered with our meetings, almost every day for a fortnight.

It was a strange and an idyllic courtship, and the stolen trysts with a schoolgirl under the apple-tree in the moonlight, the knowledge that I might find myself in serious trouble were they discovered, and the originality and indiscretion of the whole affair intoxicated me. At the end of the fortnight I had wrung from her a promise to elope with me by postchaise on the following night.

We were to drive straight to the Green, a matter of forty miles; and there to be made man and wife, "for ever and ever—Amen." I scarcely slept, in anticipation. When morning dawned I felt as if I had not been to bed for a month. She was in the garden as usual, and the sight of her thrilled me as if with a foretaste of Paradise. Breakfast was impossible; I no longer recognised myself. When noon chimed it appeared to me that the day would never by any chance draw to a conclusion. Only noon! nine interminable hours to be borne before I could hold her in my arms again!

I went for a violent tramp. It was the best thing I could do, but it did not suffice to rid me of my superfluous energy, and, though I disposed of a couple of hours in this way, and brought it up to two o'clock, the prospect of the waiting still to be endured was abominable. I did not return to dinner at my rooms. I turned into the inn of a village in which I found myself, and called for a steak and a tankard there.

Under ordinary circumstances, no meal delighted me more than some such impromptu repast, without refinements, but with a charm of its own that is missed by anything more elaborate. To-day, however, I found it choke me. I paid my bill, and, allaying the landlord's misgivings as to the quality of his viands by the excuse that I was feeling unwell, turned my steps at length in the direction of home.

By twilight I was ill with the tension. My pulses beat furiously; every nerve in my body seemed strained. I protest that I lived in that

day a whole year. Six o'clock!—seven—would the time *never* come? It was insupportable!

At a quarter to nine I stood in the shadow of the wall, breathless—trembling. A branch of the old apple-tree stretched across to me, rustling with the wind. The earliest stars were in the heavens. All Nature seemed in accord with the adventure; all Nature seemed to me to speak *her* name. Out in the town the church clock chimed the hour. Now! The feverish minutes went by, I heard no footsteps. I listened intently. Only the rustle of the apple-tree, the sighing of the wind! Could anything have happened?

The church clock boomed the quarter—hark! The green door was opening. I turned with my soul in my eyes—and saw “Carrots.”

Yes; they had found it out, and Clare had been expelled. She had been sent home to her parents that afternoon. Oh! she had left a heart-broken message for me; but it was over, finished—hopeless! I shook the dust of Troutmere from

my feet in despair without an hour's delay. Nothing else? No; I do not think there is. I heard once, years afterwards, that she was married—or, to be exact, I saw the announcement of a Miss Clare Denton's marriage in the newspaper, but whether or not she was *my* Miss "Clare Denton" I cannot say. The story finished outside the garden-gate, when I was three-and-twenty, and I have never seen my first sweetheart since.

MISS EDITH GLEN-BASSET.

MISS EDITH GLEN-BASSET.

IF Miss Glen-Basset had reached the age of seven-and-twenty without having entered into the estate of matrimony, it certainly had not been from any lack of offers. She herself explained the circumstance with characteristic frankness. She said she had never met birth, brains and good looks combined in a personality sufficiently attractive to her to cause her to relinquish her freedom. "And those are necessary ingredients to any right-thinking woman's husband," she would go on. The "birth" is due to her family, the "brains" to herself, and the "good looks" to her possible children. I may, of course, demand too much, but I shall, all the same, remain single

until I find it. Now let us talk about something else."

A charming girl, and an original girl in some respects with the proud look in her deep grey eyes, that befitted old Colonel Glen-Basset's daughter. When she descended to dinner on the day the *Majestic* steamed out of Liverpool, she was the most beautiful woman in the saloon, and so Mr. Harry Norcross thought as he contemplated her across the table.

He wondered whether she would be one of the passengers he could contrive to know on the trip, and hoped she would, mentally apostrophising the ill-luck that had placed them so far apart at meals.

She was travelling with an elderly lady, presumably her mother, he ascertained in the course of his matutinal stroll next day, but no opportunity presented itself for making her acquaintance, and indeed she appeared to take no notice of any of her fellow-passengers.

In the afternoon, however, fortune favoured him. He had been reading in his deck chair, and presently a removal and exchange of seats on his neighbour's part left him and Miss Glen-Basset next to each other.

She had put her own book down, and was gazing seaward with something like an expression of boredom on her features. As he turned, their glances met, and he made some trivial remark.

She answered carelessly, but displayed no eagerness for the remark to develop into a conversation. He returned to his magazine, and then a moment later, as if conscious she had been curt, the lady spoke again.

What do people first say to one another on board? Nobody remembers, but somehow or other the social ice always seems thinner, and easier to break there, on a voyage, than anywhere else.

In a few minutes Miss Glen-Basset and Mr.

Norcross were chatting freely, and with mutual pleasure. He found her voice agreeable and well informed. For one thing, it transpired he was an American, and as this would be Miss Glen-Basset's first visit to America, he was able to tell her a great deal she did not know and was curious about. He was handsome too, she was inclined to think the handsomest man she had seen.

"Will you remain on the other side long?" he asked.

"Oh, not very long," she said. "I am going over to stay with some friends—relatives of a sort. I do not know whether you know them—the Bonners?"

"No," he said, "I don't think I've met anyone of the name. What part do they live in?"

"Fifth Avenue. It is very nice, isn't it?"

"Oh, very," he replied. "Just the best part in the city. You will like New York immensely,

I am sure. And you're crossing at the nicest time of the year. I can tell you I shall be glad to be there myself, although this trip to Europe was the first holiday I've been able to manage for years."

"What did you think of London; did you like it?"

"No," he said, "I'm like the 'Private Secretary,' 'I *don't* like London.' It is splendid in some ways of course—its interest and associations—but—well, America suits me best; I feel more at home in it. I hope you don't think it very rude of me to say that to an Englishwoman? You did ask, you know."

She laughed.

"I don't think it rude at all, why should I? But it sounds funny to me. I can't imagine anybody disliking London, I am never so amused anywhere else. I'm happy there from the time I take my canter in the morning down to my last waltz at night. Do you ride?"

"I have ridden a great deal—in Mexico, with a pair of revolvers in the saddle."

"*Have* you? how romantic!" She regarded him with interest. "Like—like a highwayman!"

"Exactly, excepting that they were only meant for self-defence, and, as it happened, never used. I did not quote the fact as illustrative of the dangers I had passed, but as an example of rough-riding. Don't let it sink me in your estimation, but the Row or Central Park strikes me as considerably more agreeable."

Her mother found her at this juncture, and took her below to tea, for a fresh breeze had sprung up, and, though she had not observed it, it was cold sitting there now. She could not remember that he had said anything especially witty or wise, this man whose name she did not know yet, but she was vaguely conscious that she had had a very pleasant half-hour, and that the passage promised her more in the way of entertainment than it had done before he spoke.

Everyone who has ever made a week's voyage is aware how rapidly intimacies develop at sea. It is equal to, say, six months under ordinary conditions ashore, and that is putting it down very low. In two or three days her conversations with Mr. Norcross—she had learnt his name by this time—had become a regular feature of Miss Glen-Basset's programme. They met on deck after breakfast; strolled before luncheon; talked again at tea, and played chess very often after dinner. In a word, although she scarcely perceived it, her days were practically passed in his society.

Nor was the gentleman inappreciative. He knew that, were his privilege withdrawn, he would find things very slow indeed. He found them slow in the intervals, and tobacco powerless to compensate for Miss Glen-Basset's absence. The deck looked very dreary when she had retired to the saloon, and the saloon was a desert when she had gone up on deck. "I believe," he said in

confidence to his pipe on the third evening of the voyage, "I believe I am getting fond of that girl. She is different from any woman I have ever met in my life!"

It was on the fourth day—twenty-four hours after he had made this announcement to his briar—that Miss Glen-Basset became aware of the fact. How? No man could ever have fathomed how. Women divine these things, it is a sixth sense with them perhaps; anyhow Miss Glen-Basset knew that Harry Norcross was in love with her, and she was not angry.

The girl who had refused a dozen men, all "desirable," all perfectly infatuated with her, who had been her slaves, some of them from the time she came out, had conceived a tenderness for a comparative stranger whom she had known the half of a week. Such is human nature!

And she did not condemn herself.

Only when the talk of arrival was running round the ship, and people were beginning to

question what time Sandy Hook might be sighted, did she suffer her first pang of nervousness. She knew that the "good-bye" would be painful to her, and he had said nothing to lead her to suppose he looked forward to seeing her after they landed.

He came nearest to it on the last evening on board. They had not played chess after dinner, the moonlight had wooed them on to the deck, and she was looking her best as they leant against the taffrail watching the stars.

"The last night," she murmured; "how I looked forward to it when we left England! And yet it has been a delicious experience after all."

"You will find New York a 'delicious experience' too," said Mr. Norcross. "You will tell me so if we should happen to meet again."

"We are sure to do that, I suppose," she returned carelessly. "In London everybody meets—why not in New York? My mother was hoping

you meant to call on us. She means to tell you so."

"I shall be delighted," he said promptly, and then added—"If *you* hope it as well?"

"Oh," she said, "naturally; I shall be very pleased."

"Really?"

"Of course 'really'—why not?" Her naïveté was charming.

"Thank you," said Mr. Norcross, "there is nothing I should like better! If—if certain expectations that I have are realised, I meant to try to see you without an invitation. I won't say more while I'm in doubt, but—will you wish my expectations luck? Gamblers are superstitious, you know, and speculation *is* gambling, although speculation sounds more solid; I've the fancy your good wishes would do me good, Miss Glen-Basset."

She did not misunderstand him, and her heart gave a great throb of happiness. She said, "I

wish your expectations luck, Mr. Norcross!" and her hand lay for half an instant in his grasp.

It lay there on the morrow when she said "Au revoir" to him, and then she and her mother were rattling away to Fifth Avenue, and Mr. Norcross was standing amid the babel of the Customs, with a rueful look in his eyes.

His prophecy anent New York was fulfilled; she found it adorable. Everything amused her—the streets, the people, the "stores." She was taken shopping the very next morning, and bought a great many trifles she did not require for the mere pleasure of playing with the unfamiliar money. Not but what the articles were attractive too. She glanced round the great "dry goods" emporium with a smile; it was all so different from the shops at home. Just as she was saying as much, she gave a sudden start. Her companion had darted to the counter for some forgotten purchase, and the salesman who moved forward to attend to her was Mr. Harry Norcross.

The colour left her cheeks and for a moment she paused petrified. In the next, she recovered herself. How had he dared, she thought, how could he have dared!

She went forward to her friend's side. Not a muscle of her face, not a quiver of an eyelash betrayed her recognition of him.

She looked to see him appalled, broken by the discovery, but, after his first gesture of surprise, he accepted the situation with apparent calmness, measuring the material, and making up the parcel of it with the utmost *sang-froid*. No glance hinted either at apology or remorse. Miss Glen-Basset went home and cried her eyes out. The last thing possible for her to forgive herself had happened—she had fallen in her own self-esteem.

That evening his card was brought to her. The man's audacity then was boundless! She told the footman to say she declined to see him—called the servant back, and said she had changed

her mind. She looked at herself in the mirror, and descended the stairs. The haughtiness of her carriage would have become an Empress.

"This visit—?" she said icily.

"Is to make an explanation due to us both, Miss Glen-Basset."

"Us both?" The familiarity of the phrase jarred her.

"To you and me—an Englishwoman and an American! In England a business-man holding my position is looked down upon; in America he is as good as another—every bit. You think I owe you an apology—I saw as much by your face to-day. I deny it—I owe you no apology. You never asked me what my business was. I did not tell you!"

"*Why* did you not tell me?"

"Because I love you, and I intended to wait until the venture I spoke of had been realised, and I was able to sue to you as a wealthy man. You insulted me to-day, and so I must try to

convert you from your prejudices now. That is why I am here."

Her senses were whirling. Was she in a republic, or a nightmare?

"Will you listen to me?" asked Mr. Norcross.

"I am listening," she said.

And she listened for half-an-hour, her fingers clutching the arms of her chair.

When he got up to go, his face was very white and his eyes glowed.

"If things turn out as I hope, I shall come again and ask your pardon for once having been in another person's employ," he said. "May I, under those circumstances, hope to be forgiven?"

Her lips trembled; "I—I don't know," murmured Miss Glen-Basset.

A FOOLISH MAN.

A FOOLISH MAN.

It was perhaps a foolish idea, but I was young at the time, and it struck me as singularly effective. I had been working very hard on another novel, and I had gone to Eastbourne to recuperate, to amuse myself, to do nothing. I was able to afford a holiday, as my previous book, "Eve's Dilemma," had been enormously successful. I should add that I write as "Eric Evershed," but my name is really Edward Grahame.

Yes; I had gone to Eastbourne, and it was after I had been there about a week that I was introduced to Miss Patricia Holt. To explain

why my introduction to Miss Holt was noteworthy, it is necessary to go back a few days: in fact to go back to the morning after my arrival.

I was sauntering on the Terrace after breakfast, when I saw a girl approaching who immediately riveted my attention. I am not certain that she was exactly beautiful, though I am quite sure it would be wrong to describe her as "pretty," but there was something in her face striking and uncommon. She looked a clever girl; more than that, a girl whom it would be very charming to know. She was walking beside a bath-chair, the occupant of which was a middle-aged lady, who was presumably her mother, and, as I passed, she turned her head, and, without the slightest suggestion of coquetry, lifted her eyes to me. Perhaps I am (or used to be at thirty years) impressionable. I was instantly conscious that I was glad I had chosen Eastbourne to idle in; I felt that my walks would not be quite purposeless henceforward. It was a small

place, and I hoped I might pass the girl with the grey eyes that afternoon.

I did not; but I met her again upon the Terrace on the morrow. Evidently it was the custom of the mother and daughter to take their exercise here every morning, and every morning accordingly it became the scene of my own perambulations too.

There was never an opportunity for my addressing them, and anxious as I was to make their acquaintance, my visit would doubtless have terminated without that consummation being attained, but for a lucky chance.

One evening, on turning into the bar of an hotel near my rooms for a whisky and soda, I met a friend of mine—Charlie Atherley. He had, he told me, only run down that day, was awfully glad to see me, and the rest of it. Our *rencontre* ended by my arranging to call for him on the following morning to have a swim.

After the swim we looked about together, and,

drifting to the Terrace, came face to face, almost as we touched it, with my incognita and her mamma. Atherley took off his hat, and his bow was returned. He knew them—was there ever such good fortune?

“Who are they?” I asked, as we passed on.

“Mrs. and Miss Holt. I ought to call on them.”

“You know them so well?”

“Oh, very well; I used to know the old man, too; he is dead.”

“I’ve often noticed them,” I said. “I should like to be introduced.”

“Oh, certainly,” Atherley replied. “I’ll introduce you with pleasure. She is a very nice girl, Patricia Holt.”

“She looks it. She looks a clever one also. Is she?”

“Yes, she is. As a ‘literary gent’ you ought to suit her. By the way, what do you call yourself now, ‘Grahame,’ or ‘Evershed’?”

"I call myself 'Grahame,' of course," I answered. "And for heaven's sake don't drag my book in—nothing is more embarrassing when one is introduced! In nine cases out of ten, the people haven't read it, and one feels the completest fool alive."

We were re-passing the band-stand, and Miss Holt was sitting down—the bath-chair at a standstill by the rails. She smiled at my friend afresh. He paused—shook hands. In another moment I was being presented, and saying "How do you do?" So began my friendship with Miss Holt.

For five minutes I have been looking at a word I have written, considering whether I ought to erase it. "Friendship?" *Was* it friendship? or was I really in love with her? Or was it only a flirtation? I cannot decide. Let "friendship" stand!

She had a voice that gave distinction to commonplaces. But she uttered commonplaces very seldom, and her voice was delightful always. I

knew, as one does know these things sometimes, that she was glad to have me introduced to her, and I had never enjoyed an hour more than I did the one in which we spent chatting there, listening to the band.

When at length we separated, and my friend and I crossed the parade together, Atherley said to me: "You are 'taken,' old man!"

"I?"

"Oh, yes—you! It was obvious. And Miss Holt did not seem to find your admiration distasteful."

"What nonsense!" But I was enchanted.

"It's a fact; I've seen her with lots of men, and I know her. She talked to you enthusiastically—for Miss Holt."

"She is reserved as a rule?"

"The least bit in the world perhaps. She gives one the idea of being bored in conversation with most men."

"What are her tastes—her predilections?"

“Oh, she will tell you all that soon enough herself, I expect. Indeed, I can’t define! She reads a great deal; adores art in every shape and form; and is very musical. If you understand people like Turner and Wagner you will be in great sympathy with her. As for myself, I don’t—and I don’t pretend to. She doesn’t think anything of my intellect, but she likes me and treats me as a good-natured Philistine. She is very frank, Patricia Holt, and she likes candour in others. I tell her plainly that for me to care for a piece of music there must be a tune in it; and before I can appreciate a picture, I must be able to understand what it means. She laughs, and accepts my ‘ignorance’ as part of me. If I affected a knowledge that I don’t possess, and *posed* to her, she would bowl me out in five minutes, and despise me.”

I did like Wagner, and I believed I knew something about art. The more I heard of Miss Holt the more I believed we should get on to-

gether. I had wanted to know her—and now I was certain I should find her intensely sympathetic. I asked Charlie to lunch, and paid for a bottle of champagne, in the exuberance of my gratitude towards him. After that I went home and wrote a short story—a story based on the foregoing facts, but which ended better than this one does. In my reveries—remember how young I was!—I already exalted Miss Holt into a “Beatrice,” a “Laura,” an Inspiration. Eastbourne was now Arcadia, or Alexander Selkirk’s island, according to whether I was with her or not.

After three days Charlie went back to town. I did not care; my footing with the Holts was now established, and I provided myself with the newest reviews and magazines to lend them when we met. The old lady always gave a smile of pleasure when I approached. She liked me.

“Good morning, Mrs. Holt. And how are you to-day?”

“Ah! Mr. Grahame—how d’ye do? Thank you, I had a good night. Eastbourne is making me quite well.”

“Have you seen this week’s illustrated something? There are some capital sketches from the war.”

“Oh! you are very kind. I should like to look at them.” And she would peruse the paper while her daughter and I conversed. So for a fortnight. As yet I had dropped no hint of my profession. It charmed me to reflect how much closer it would bring me to Patricia when she knew, but I wished to delay the pleasure—to play with it. It was silly, but the suppression had a fascination for me. I could picture her big eyes opening when I casually mentioned the fact that I was a literary man—that I had written “Eve’s Dilemma.” I could hear her exclaim, “Oh! why did you not tell me before?” and see her start of interest and surprise. In imagination I told her in fifty ways. In one I came upon her

crying—this was my favourite way—and I begged her to tell me what was the matter. “What is it?” I murmured. “Miss Holt, you have had bad news?” She smiled, and brushed her tears aside. “I am very foolish,” she said; “don’t laugh at me, but this book has affected me more powerfully than anything of the kind I have read for years! You know it, of course?” And she pointed to the familiar cover of my fifth edition. I took it up carelessly. “You make me very proud,” I answered. “Proud?” “I wrote it—that is why. I am so glad it pleases you.” “*You* are ‘Eric Evershed’?” She put out her hand, and my own clasped it. There was a fervour in her face that I had never seen there—a new magnetism in her gaze. “Oh!” she gasped, and then—. Yes; that was my favourite way, and somehow she was in my arms, and I was imploring her to be my wife.

It will be seen that, despite my earlier inquiry as to whether or not I was really in love with

Patricia Holt, I had no doubt about it at this time. I wanted her for my wife, and, though my position hardly justified immediate matrimony, I seriously contemplated proposing to her.

The more I think about it the more sure I am that it *was* love! The idea of marriage had always been distasteful to me. To surrender my freedom, and be fettered for life to the same woman's apron-strings had always been a thought positively odious to me. Yet now I debated offering myself to a girl—and to a girl I had only known three weeks. Yes, I loved her; and what is more, she was an excuse for any folly. I did not struggle—I resigned myself absolutely to her irresistible spell.

One morning I was more than ever her slave. I cannot define how or why she appealed to me more strongly that day than any other. There are some things—a woman's manner is one of them—which it is difficult to convey by words; but with every intonation of her voice, every

syllable that fell from her, I found myself more and more deeply fascinated. It was agony to me when the band ceased, and I had to rise and bow myself away.

I passed the greater part of the afternoon asking myself how I could secure an opportunity of confessing my passion to her. I had never yet found myself alone with her, and in the frenzy which now possessed me further silence seemed simply impossible. I lit another cigar, and went out to commune with the ocean.

I tramped along the parade, and thence to the sea-wall, and then, as I was on the point of descending to the beach, I saw Miss Holt sitting on one of the benches with half-closed eyes.

Fate was smiling on me indeed! For the first time she was unaccompanied, and at *such* a time!

“Miss Holt!”

“Mr. Grahame!” She welcomed me with a delicious little start. “How you frightened me!”

"I could scarcely believe it was you," I said. "I thought you never went out in the afternoon?"

"I do not often. But my mother was asleep, and the weather tempted me."

She put her hand on a book as she spoke. Was I dreaming, or was my fancy-picture realised? I was *not* dreaming; the book was "Eve's Dilemma." My heart rose into my throat.

There was a momentary pause between us. For the life of me I was unable, even then, to resist the pleasure of delaying the announcement of my identity. First I would tell her that I loved her.

"How glad I am that I came this way!" I said. "Do you know that I was thinking of you, and wishing it were to-morrow already?"

The proposal scenes in my books have always evoked encomiums; but somehow by word of mouth, *in propria personâ*, I was unable to be equally happy. I drew a diagram with my walking-

stick on the sand. I fixed my eyes desperately on the futile waves. I could not find the words to go on, and my silence was becoming ridiculous. The yellow cover of "Eve's Dilemma" offered me a resource.

"Is it good—this book?" I asked.

"No; it is intolerably stupid. Why do people write such things?"

It was a hot day—a burning, breathless day; but I do not think I ever experienced a more violent sensation of cold before or since.

"Ah!" I said; and put the volume slowly down.

No; I did not propose to her. I went back to town the following morning, and I never saw her to speak to, again. But I never forgot her, never forgot the experience, and Atherley is bound by the most solemn oath never to divulge to Miss Holt that the author of "Eve's Dilemma" and Mr. Grahame were one and the same man.

MY OWN TRUE LOVE STORY.

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MY OWN TRUE LOVE STORY.

I HAD never been called an impressionable woman, and for weeks I refused to be candid with myself. I think it was only when I went into the shop and bought the man's photograph, after tearing myself away from the window at least a dozen times, that I realised what an idiot I had become. Then it was manifest. At thirty odd years of age I had fallen in love, as romantically, as preposterously, as any girl of seventeen, for I had fallen in love with an actor whom I did not know.

I have said that I had never been called an impressionable woman, but I may say more: I had always been considered very much the re-

verse, and in my youth had occasioned my worthy mother great trouble by my "peculiar disposition." Dances were abhorrent to me, and as to flirting, I did not know how to do it. No; men did not attract me a bit—doubtless, too, *I* wearied *them*. I asked nothing better than to be left alone with my pen.

To-day I had made myself just such a life as I required. My books were successful; my house was a pleasant one; and, if I did not go into society a great deal, my circle of friends contained a number of clever, and even celebrated, people.

Well, I went one night to the Diadem Theatre. It was the first time I had seen Brudenell; he interested me immensely. His quiet voice, his earnestness held me from the beginning, and after the big scene came, and his passionate outburst came with it, I told myself he was the first actor on the stage.

I do not suppose, if I had been doing dra-

matic criticism for a paper, that my enthusiasm would have carried me to the length of recording such an extravagance as that, but one often feels things which one lacks the courage to write, and before the expiration of a week I found myself among the audience at the Diadem Theatre again.

I was affected as powerfully as before. He appealed to me intellectually and emotionally. I liked the piece, and I liked his performance. In a word, I took seats at the "Diadem" more times than I care, or than I am able, to count.

Of the development of my feelings into ridiculous proportions I have spoken already. I stopped to look at the shop-window every morning for a fortnight, and at last, thoroughly wearied of fleeing a temptation which I knew would recur next day, I went in, and asked for his likeness.

The man brought me a number, but I chose the one I had intended—a profile. He wanted

me to have another as well, assuring me that "this sold largely—among young ladies." I said "Really?" as indifferently as I could manage, being very ashamed of myself, and was so disgusted at my weakness that I did not take my purchase out of the envelope till evening.

Then I put it on my study-table, where I could see it while I wrote. I thought how characteristic a face it was, how much it said. I accepted several invitations I should otherwise have refused, because I gathered it was possible that the popular actor-manager would be present, and I wished, more fervently than I had wished anything before, that I were a playwright instead of a novelist, that I might have the felicity of hearing my lines interpreted by him.

One Sunday we met. The hostess introduced him to me; "Mr. Brudenell: Miss Cleeve—'George Effingham,' you know!" and I wondered if he had read my books.

He did not say that he had, but he was very

nice, speaking in the low, grave tones in which he uttered his commonplaces on the stage.

I congratulated him on the success he was making, and he thanked me. He said how difficult it was to get hold of good pieces. I found he was to take me down to dinner, and exerted myself to talk as well as I was able. Over the entrées I made him laugh, and I turn hot when I remember the delight this "triumph" gave me.

The theatre formed the principal topic of our conversation, and I referred to the admirable support given to him by his leading lady.

"You must find her an enormous help in your great scene?" I said. "She plays up to you splendidly."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is easy business," he answered; "the part really plays itself."

I was surprised, for it had appeared to me that it would be singularly ineffective in weaker hands.

"She is a favourite with the public, and in a theatre like mine one is obliged to have well-known names," he added; "but as a matter of fact, the piece would go quite as well with a company at half the cost."

"You do not mean without Mr. Warrington, too?"

"Why not?" he said. "What has Warrington to do? The whole burden of the piece rests on me."

Momentarily I was dismayed; the coolness of the statement struck me as almost conceited. Then I realised that I understood nothing about the matter, and that my companion knew all. "It must certainly be a tremendous strain," I agreed.

"You would say so if you had seen me the first night! Nobody but an actor knows what frightfully hard work a big part is."

He gave me an interesting account of his experiences. I was astonished to learn that it was

years before his salary touched the point of three guineas a week.

“I ran away from home, and I had sworn to conquer,” he said; “but it was a terrible change to the life I had been used to—terrible! Still, I stuck to my profession in the face of more discouragements and hardships than you can imagine. I shall never forget the turning point of my career.”

“Tell me!” I said.

“I was engaged for quite small business in a stock company in Edinburgh, and at one of the rehearsals we got a message to say that the leading man was too ill to appear that night. It was a tremendous part. I may as well name it: it was Hamlet. The manager was in despair. He looked round at all the company helplessly. Suddenly his eye fell on me, stripling that I was. Why he selected me I shall never understand, but the next moment he beckoned me forward. ‘Brudenell,’ he exclaimed, ‘you will play Hamlet

to-night!’ Everything swam before me, I almost fainted. Then I grasped that my chance had come at last. ‘I will, sir,’ I answered; ‘and I will make a success of it.’ I knew and loved the part. I went out on Calton Hill, and there declaimed Shakespeare’s lines to the blue sky. When the hour approached for me to go down to the theatre, my teeth chattered, Miss Cleeve. The thought of the critical audience awaiting me, of the Edinburgh Press sitting there in solemn judgment, unnerved me so completely that it seemed to me I should never dare to open my mouth upon the stage. My companions in the dressing-room chaffed me. They were jealous; but, as it happened, it was the best thing for me they could have done. All my resolution returned. The call-boy summoned me; I strode to the wings, my heart on fire. My cue came. From that hour I have never looked back!”

He tossed off his champagne, swept the hair from his forehead, and smiled at me pensively.

"But you are encouraging me to bore you with my reminiscences," he said. "Talk to me of yourself."

I did; I spent a very enjoyable evening, and I heard afterwards that George Brudenell had called me "a charming woman." It was arranged that I should accompany our hostess to a celebration supper at the Diadem Theatre, and I looked forward to meeting him again.

The play had been running two hundred nights, or three hundred nights—I am sure I forget which. It was a great success anyhow, and there were toasts, and congratulatory speeches, and that sort of thing.

George Brudenell paid me great attention. This time he did speak of a book I had written, and—shall I ever forget my ecstasy?—asked me if I would care to collaborate with him on a drama.

"I am not an author," he said, "but my knowledge of the stage will be useful. I have an

idea for a piece! Of course I play the leading part."

I consented rapturously, and he sent me his "idea" the following day. I cannot say that I liked it very much, but I went to work on it zealously, and sometimes he called on me, to see how I was getting on.

At least, to see how I was getting on was ostensibly the motive of his visits, but instead of discussing the play, I generally found that we were talking of ourselves. He confessed to me that he was not a happy man; that his had been a mistaken marriage; and when he sighed, and leant his head wearily on his white hand, my heart ached for him.

That he liked me there is no doubt. Whether I was in danger or not I would rather not determine, even to myself. But he came often, and we corresponded, and—well, I cannot say what the end might have been; I only know what it was.

At last the play was done, and I sent it to him. After a week I got a note begging me to call. He was in his "sanctum," as he termed it, when I was shown in. The MS. was lying on the desk.

"Sit down," he said, with a bright smile; "how happy it makes me to see you here!"

I took a chair in front of him.

"You like the drama?" I asked.

"I like it," he said; "yes; but there are a good many alterations needed. The leading lady's part must be weakened."

"Weakened?"

"It detracts from me," he said; "she has too many good lines. Look here, for instance; I have marked some of the places."

I looked. He had marked *fifty* places if he had marked one.

"And something else," he said. "You have not let me finish every act. *I* must bring down *all* the curtains."

“But—but—is that artistic under the circumstances?”

“Oh, artistic!” he laughed. “This is business, not art, my dear Miss Cleeve. The applause is too distributed as you have written the piece. I have to stand on the stage in one of the scenes while the leading lady gets two distinct ‘rounds.’ You must cut those lines out, and give something as good to me, instead.”

The servant came in with a message, and he begged me to excuse him.

I was glad to be left alone; I was dumfounded. This was “business, not art!” The piece must be weakened that Mr. Brudenell might obtain more rounds of applause from the pit and gallery. Was I dreaming?

He was absent some time. I turned the pages of the MS., and read the suggestions he had pencilled! Merciful powers! and this was the man I had thought was an artist! Anything

more puerile, more contemptible it had never entered into the human imagination to conceive.

There were some proof-sheets lying on the desk. I saw they were the proofs of an "Interview" sent him for correction. What was that?

"Mr. Brudenell raised his *clever* head——" the "clever" had been inserted by Mr. Brudenell! Here was a whole sentence written in:—"Mr. Brudenell, like Sarah Bernhardt, might have distinguished himself in many of the arts. He is a talented amateur painter, models with singular felicity, and earlier in life was frequently tempted, by the appreciation accorded to his literary work, to desert the footlights for the study. The British playgoer may be thankful that he did not." Heavens above!

Here was another line the subject of the interview had put in: "Like most clever men, Mr. George Brudenell is singularly modest. It was with the greatest difficulty we could get him to

speaking of himself. 'The interviewer,' he said, with his musical laugh, 'appals me!'"

When he re-entered the room, I told him that I would consider his valuable hints, and rose to take my leave. Perhaps it was quite as well for me that I "collaborated" with him on a play, though the work was never produced. It was certainly the means of restoring my common sense. I never met him again, and now there is a cabinet photograph of George Brudenell to be had cheap. That is the end of my own true love story—it might have ended worse.

SPRETÆ INJURIA FORMÆ.

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MR. ASHFORD junior was disturbed in mind. It *is* disturbing to a young man to perceive that he is taking extraordinary interest in a young woman whom there ought to be no question of his marrying. It is bad enough when her ineligibility for such an honour threatens storms with his parents, and frantic endeavours to persuade them that it does not exist, but when it is so palpable that he feels he can never make those endeavours, and lies awake in the night telling himself he is an egregious ass, it is more disquieting still.

Mr. Edward Ashford was in the City, but if he had been in the Household Brigade, and heir

to a dukedom, the horror of the *mésalliance* he had contemplated could not have overwhelmed him more.

For he *had* contemplated it, that was the worst part of it. He had actually had the imprudence to confess his attachment yesterday, and Miss Marshall had promised that if his father and mother consented, she would be his wife.

He was in the Mark Lane office now, attempting to concentrate his attention on the correspondence upon which he was engaged, but losing the thread of the letter every other moment while he wondered how he was "to get out of it."

The Ashfords were in the grain trade. At least Mr. Ashford senior was in the grain trade, and Edward, his son, was heir to the business. In the meantime he drew a salary of five pounds a week, and lived at home.

He had three sisters, of whom the eldest was fourteen. And these young ladies had a daily governess of whom he had seen a good deal. It

was the governess who was responsible for the perturbation he was suffering. The governess was Miss Marshall, and he had called Miss Marshall "Stella," and "My wife to be." He broke out into a cold perspiration at the thought. How—*how* could he get out of it!

He left the city early, and made his way towards home. His mama was driving, he learnt on reaching the house, and the eldest of the little girls had gone with her.

He went upstairs to the schoolroom, and by the exercise of some diplomacy contrived to get rid of Evelyn and Georgina. When they were gone, he stood and looked at their governess awkwardly, asking himself again what he was to say.

She sat at the table, before the lesson-books at which he had surprised her. A smile of welcome stole over her face as the door shut, and her eyes flashed charmingly. She was beautiful.

Not pretty, not good-looking—she was beautiful. Mentally he acknowledged the fact once more as she rose and came to him. If she had been anything but what she was, he reflected regretfully, she would have been a wife to be proud of. But his sisters' governess!

“Well?” he said, taking her hands.

She glanced at him inquiringly, and then withdrew them from his clasp. In their interview of the day before he had been considerably more ardent.

“Well?” she echoed.

He dropped into the basket-chair, and sighed.

“You have spoken to Mrs. Ashford?” she said quickly, “and she is angry?”

“No.”

“*Not* angry?”

“I haven't spoken to her.”

“Your father then?”

“I haven't spoken to either of them yet. I—.”

His tongue was thick in his mouth, and he grew pale with nervousness.

"Something is the matter," said Miss Marshall. "What is it? I can see by your manner something is wrong. Tell me, Edward."

"It isn't easy to tell you," he muttered; "I've been thinking. I've been thinking that if I were really a friend to you—."

"'A friend'?"

"I mean if your interests were really dear to me, I should hesitate before I acknowledged what has passed between us to my people. I will, of course, if you insist upon it, you know, but—well, frankly it isn't advisable."

"I don't understand you," said Miss Marshall coldly. "Do you mind explaining?"

"It's like this. It is no good mincing things; they will never consent, and—and of course you'll lose your place when they know. That's about all I shall do for you."

"My 'place'!" she repeated scornfully. "I

am not likely to keep my 'place' very long in any case—I have other views—but how is it you are sure to-day they will 'never consent?' It wasn't like that you spoke yesterday."

"Yesterday I wasn't myself. I was excited, impetuous; I spoke without consideration."

There was a long pause.

"Do you mean," inquired the girl at length, "that *all* you said yesterday was a mistake?"

His silence was an answer, and he stared hard at the ground. She was now as white as he.

"That is quite enough, Mr. Ashford," she said. "You needn't be afraid of a breach of promise case. I don't wish to hurt your feelings, but candidly I do not think I have sustained any loss."

"If I were my own master—" he broke out.

"Don't deceive yourself," she answered; "and don't let us have any painful discussion. I release you. You are free, as you wished. You spoke,

as you say, on impulse; on deliberation we will agree to forget yesterday's blunder. I should have liked you better if you had had the pluck to be frank; but you have gained what you came into the room for, and I suppose my opinion of you is a detail, and of no consequence. Please send your sisters back to me when you go down—I am waiting for them."

When she was left alone she cried a little—for she had had the weakness to be fond of him—and then, drying her eyes, drew out a letter from her pocket, which she read through again, for the sixth or seventh time that day. It bore the signature of a well-known dramatic coach, and offered her something that she had been working for a year and more in the hope of obtaining—a theatrical engagement. While Miss Marshall had been giving lessons in grammar, and botany, and elementary French to the Misses Ashford, she had been utilising the salary to study elocution and gesture herself, with a view

to renouncing the schoolroom for the stage. It was her secret, her consolation.

Yesterday she had been ready to waive all her hopes and ambitions in order to marry the young man she loved; this afternoon she tendered her resignation to her employer, and Edward Ashford heard to his dismay at dinner that Miss Marshall would be leaving in a week's time.

He had no further interview with her in the meanwhile. She afforded him no chance of one, even if he had sought it ardently, which he did not. The week passed, and Miss Marshall departed, and, at dinner again, he heard that a new governess had been engaged in her stead. And nobody suspected that the subject had any interest to him, or guessed that he had once proposed marriage to the girl who had gone. He had extricated himself from the mess all by himself, as became a smart young man in the city. He ought to have felt more jubilant than he did.

It is not my intention to follow Miss Marshall's

fortunes from the date she shook the dust of Regent's Park off her cheap shoes to the day when, after three years' hard work in the provinces, she appeared as "Miss Stella Trehearne" in London, and scored a tremendous success. The point is that she did appear as "Miss Trehearne" in London, and that Edward Ashford heard her talked about, as did everybody else, without having the faintest idea of her identity.

He had been on the point of going to the theatre where she was playing more than once, but something had always prevented him, on the day that he was invited to a garden-party where she was to be present; and, accepting the informal invitation with alacrity, he regretted the fact that he would in consequence be unable to talk about her performance with her. It would have been very pleasant, he thought, to have discussed her "part" with a popular actress—an altogether novel experience to him. He had never met an actress at all, and he was really chagrined

by the consciousness that he would have to say, "Oh, I haven't seen you in it," just when their conversation was getting interesting. That their conversation *would* get interesting he had no doubt. He had no small opinion of his attractions, and he took exceptional pains with his *toilette* after lunch, and, contemplating his reflection, and his new tie, in the office glass, smirked complacently.

The party was at Twickenham, and his companion was a son of the hostess. There was already a crowd of people on the lawn when they arrived, and he asked him if Miss Trehearne was present yet quite eagerly.

"Has she come? Is she coming?"

"'She'?"

"Miss Trehearne! Didn't you tell me she would be here when you asked me?"

"Oh, yes I did. I didn't know whom you meant for the moment, that's all. That's it, eh? You're spooney on the actress?"

“Rot!” said Edward, flushing. “I’ve never even seen her. One is curious though. People of that kind are amusing to meet.”

“‘People of that kind’—my dear Ashford! One can tell you don’t meet many by the way you talk of ’em. Why, they go everywhere now, and are taken quite as a matter of course. In fact they are rather toadied.”

“Of course,” said Edward, “of course they are. You quite misunderstand me. I’ve the greatest possible admiration for artists of all kinds. I’m quite looking forward to being introduced to this lady.”

“Oh, I’ll introduce you when I see her. But there is generally such a crowd about her, a fellow doesn’t get much of a look in, you know.”

“She is so handsome as all that?”

“Have you never seen her really?—where do you live! Fancy not having been to see Stella Trehearne! Yes, she *is* handsome. And she is extraordinarily clever. She is quite the rage.

Getting fifty quid a week already I believe, and hasn't been on the stage any time at all."

Mr. Ashford felt momentarily quite small by reason of his ignorance. There was scarcely anybody here with whom he was acquainted, and it also occurred to him, with sudden misgiving, that his tailor was not quite so first-class as he had hitherto imagined. He took his way over the smooth velvety turf a shade clumsily. To be among so many pretty women, and not know any of them, gave him an appreciation of the feelings of a fly outside the pots of honey in a grocer-shop. It all looked lovely, but he was not "in it".

His friend appeared rather repentant of having brought him he fancied—inclined to shake him off, and anxious to give him the slip. But for his curiosity to see Miss Trehearne, he would have allowed one of the little ruses he detected to succeed, but the presentation was his predominant idea, and until it was effected, he re-

solved to stick to the young man's side whether he were wanted there or not.

"Oh," said the other suddenly, "there she is!"

Edward could see nothing except a cluster of young men and some roses nodding on a woman's hat, but he was piloted nearer, and then the group parted, and he was in the midst of it.

"Miss Trehearne, may I introduce my friend, Mr. Ashford!"

She looked round, and displayed a face at the sight of which his senses swam. His head reeled, and he was afraid of his legs failing him too.

"Oh yes, how d'ye do," she said indifferently. "I've met Mr.—er—Ashford before." Then she resumed her conversation, and Edward dropped out of the little ring of worshippers sick and speechless.

"I thought you told me you'd never met her?" said his friend joining him after a few minutes.

"I never have," said Edward faintly, "she was mistaken."

"She didn't seem to take to you much! Did she?"

"No," said Edward, "she didn't seem to take to me. By the way I think I must be off. I—I have to get home."

WISE AT LAST.

WISH AT LAST

WISE AT LAST.

HE had run through some thirty or forty thousand pounds. He had dropped money on the turf, at the tables, and made a fool of himself in various ways; but the fellows who knew him best were all of a mind that "dear old Harry" had never before made *such* a fool of himself as he did in converting little Myra Bromley into Mrs. Henry Capel.

Nevertheless it was a matter of opinion. In the theatre—in the dressing-rooms—there were not wanting ladies of Miss Bromley's own profession who considered that the girl was getting a good deal the worse of the bargain.

"My dear," said the girl who played the

Amazon Chief in the highly successful burlesque which had just entered the second year of its run; "my dear, take my advice, and never marry a gentleman! Marry a mummer for choice, or a shopkeeper, or a shoeblack, or best of all, don't marry anyone. But a gentleman's fatal—and a gentleman without any money—good Lord!—" Words failed her; she threw up her hands warningly and a small chorus of approval showed that the house was with her.

All the same little Myra Bromley did marry her Harry Capel. For one thing, he was the first man who had ever asked her to be his wife; and for another, she was very genuinely in love with him indeed.

She migrated from her "combined room" in the Kennington quarter, to furnished apartments in Maddox Street, and here, on the first floor of a lodging house, the ill-assorted couple started housekeeping.

It is scarcely necessary to say she left the

stage. Some things are inevitable, and one of them is that an actress always leaves the stage when she marries, and as invariably returns to it sooner or later.

She did not want to leave it, for she knew her husband's position, and understood that the five pounds a week salary that she was drawing would be very useful to them, but Mr. Capel insisted.

"My dear child," he said, "is it likely I would allow you to remain! We may not be very flush just at present, but I am sure we shall be comfortable, and I should not know a moment's peace if you continued at the 'Audacity' as my wife. No, no, we'll live quietly here for awhile until I drop into something, and presently take my word for it, you will forget you ever were an actress at all."

As a matter of fact the conclusion was somewhat irrelevant, for her desire had been prompted far less by any yearnings for histrionic triumphs

than by the wish to augment their slender income. But she obeyed, as a wife should, and for six months or more her only visits to the theatre were made in the dress-circle or the stalls. Sometimes she got orders, and sometimes Mr. Capel paid. At first it was very good fun—the unaccustomed position on the other side of the footlights. She enjoyed the novelty of it, her gloved hands folded, and the lorgnette by her side, but by degrees both of the pair began to sigh for the past they had relinquished. The girl's thoughts followed the players to the dressing-rooms between the acts, and the man began to reflect moodily that the matrimonial blisses were a shade slow compared with the bachelor frolics of auld lang syne.

And he did not “drop into” anything, and their capital ran very low. The gingerbread began to show through the gilt, and it was stale gingerbread moreover, at least to the man.

Little Mrs. Capel was neglected by her hus-

band, and bored by her meditations. He took to going out alone in the evening now. He said that if he was to get hold of any post, it was necessary to meet fellows, and keep in the swim. There may have been something in it, but it was not lively for the woman staring at the clock, and the re-read periodicals, or the scaffolding of the houses that were undergoing repairs on the opposite side of the way. She told him so once; it was the prelude to the crisis. He had been out all day, and only returned at dinner-time, to hastily swallow the meal, and retire to his room in order to dress.

When he re-entered the parlour, she enquired where he was going.

"Is it essential," she said ironically, "to come in at all? Your visits are so brief that it seems to me you must find it an inconvenience to make them."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Mrs. Capel, "that I am moping

myself to death. I married you for your society, Harry, and I need not remind you that I am not getting much of it."

He was hipped, angry, out of sorts. He had lost a pony at a race meeting that day, and a pony to him now was as a monkey a little while ago.

"I am sorry," he said savagely, "that you regret my marrying you; if you were single again, you may take my word for it, I wouldn't!"

It was the first occasion that anything like plain-speaking on the subject had occurred between them. He seized his hat, and left the house in a rage; Myra sat still with the tears in her eyes, and mutiny in her soul.

Why should she be left to eat out her heart like this, she demanded of herself. Better the distractions of her old life a thousand times. He regretted their marriage, and she, too, regretted it. Well, then, he could lead his own life, and she would lead hers. She would go to the

“Audacity” the very next morning, and try for a re-engagement. She would go to-night—now! The sooner, the wiser. They were preparing for a new piece. To-morrow might be too late.

She ran into the bedroom her husband had just vacated, and hastily proceeded to don her cloak and hat. In fastening the latter, she dropped the pin, and, stooping for it, found that it had fallen on the jacket he had exchanged for a dress-coat.

She picked them both up together, and a note fell out of the jacket pocket—a note in a woman’s handwriting, which began “My Ducky.”

She was not a heroine, only a very natural girl, and she read the note through from the address to the signature. When she had finished the perusal, she took the cloak and hat off again, and sat down in the armchair, thinking, until Mr. Capel returned.

It was one o’clock when the street door was unlocked, and his steps were heard ascending

the stairs. Mrs. Capel stood up, with the note in her hand.

"You should be more careful," she said; "or perhaps since you regretted your marriage so deeply, you were anxious I should assist you to regain your freedom. I promise you to do my best."

"Are you mad!"

"No," she said, "I am very sane. We have both made a desperate mistake, and my eyes are opened to it. Six months ago I should have been prostrate with misery to find you false to me. To-day I thank Heaven for my chance of escape. I can divorce you, and I mean to do it."

"You are mistaken," he answered sullenly. "I am sorry to dispel an illusion, but you cannot divorce me. I may have been false to you, but I have never been cruel. You are my wife, and you will have to continue so."

"I will not live with you another day!"

"Oh, that may be, but my wife you are, and will remain. Any lawyer will tell you as much."

She broke down then, and wept passionately; and clumsily, because he was ashamed of himself, he strove to console her. His efforts, however, were quite unavailing, and after abandoning the attempt in despair, and seeking refuge in a pipe, he left her to herself, and turned into bed.

When he woke the next morning, she was gone. He must have slept soundly, for her box was packed, and her preparations had not disturbed him.

A letter lay on the table beside him, and, reading it, he saw that she had left him for ever. On the whole, he was relieved to learn it, and he was not surprised in the course of three or four days to see her name announced as a member of the forthcoming "Audacity" burlesque. Well, the episode was over. He had tried most things, and found them a failure before essaying matrimony, and marriage had proved as empty as

the rest. There was nothing now to prevent him resuming without restrictions the more unfettered life he had forsaken at the temptation of little Myra Bromley's pretty face. He would clear out of the Maddox Street lodging, and take a couple of rooms somewhere *en garçon*. He balanced his cash, and decided that he was justified in treating himself to a well-chosen little dinner, and a music-hall afterwards. As for Myra, he did not want any more to do with her. She had left him, and he did not intend to think of her again. It was his "reward", he told himself bitterly for marrying her—her recriminations and desertion. He felt that he had been guilty of a certain King Cophetua nobility in making her his wife, at all when—. No, he could not dupe himself about that; she had been honest enough, but it had been very generous of him notwithstanding! He could not exactly determine why, but it had been a *mésalliance*, and when a man made a *mésalliance* the least he had a right to look for in return was

gratitude and devotion. Bah, if he were wise, he would go down to the theatre, and box her ears in the presence of a witness or two, and let her get her divorce after all. On the whole he thought he would! Let the account close—wipe it out—obliterate it. Hang her!

Whether he would, or would not have done so in the ordinary course of events however, there is no means of determining. He did not, as things turned out, because while he was still considering it Myra Bromley made a sudden and unexpected leap into public favour, and commanded in the course of a very few months a salary of first twenty-five, next thirty, and then fifty pounds a week. Mr. Capel, his ire exhausted, perceived that in ridding himself of a wife on whom he had a right to levy handsome contributions he would be (to use an expressive vulgarism) pulling his nose to spite his face.

His circumstances, thanks to the illness of the “principal” into whose shoes the fortunate little

"understudy" had stepped, were now vastly improved. He took very cosy chambers indeed; called on his tailor; and was no longer ashamed to sun himself in Piccadilly between the hours of three and five. His correspondence with the goose who laid the golden eggs was rare and brief; but sometimes, when his allowance had failed to suffice for his weekly requirements, he dropped a polite request for an additional "tenner," and, as Myra herself was living quite cheaply, she always had it to spare, and sent it to him. This state of things continued for three years, and then—as might have been foreseen—Mrs. Henry Capel fell in love with an actor.

He was ready, and anxious, to marry her, but she explained her position to him, and told him, without disguising her love, that they could never be anything more than they were to each other while her husband lived. She was, as she had always been, as straight as a die, and no breath of scandal had touched her. Charlie

Eames, who was a thoroughly good fellow, did not attempt to shake her resolution. He only pondered miserably, and then, arriving at a plan of action, went to her at last, and suggested it.

“This blackguard of yours is in Society, isn’t he?” he said. “Knows lots of swell people, and *they* all know he is married to you? Well, look here, Myra darling, you can’t divorce him—compel *him* to divorce *you*. If you are known to be openly living with me, he won’t be able to help himself—he daren’t let it be said, that he refuses to divorce you because he makes you keep him out of your salary, and there could be no other explanation of his attitude! For very shame he’ll have to proceed, and I swear to you on all my gods I’ll make you my wife the moment the decree nisi is made absolute. What do you say?”

She demurred a long time, but she ended by saying what most women similarly circumstanced would have said. She said she trusted her lover,

and that her husband was a scoundrel. She consented, and Mr. Capel to his egregious disgust found his hand forced beyond remonstrance.

Myra Capel is Mrs. Charlie Eames to-day, and a very happy wife. Mr. Henry Capel is borrowing fivers, and drifting so rapidly towards a subsistence derived from the billiard-rooms that he already regrets his concession to appearances. Such a number of people know the true inwardness of the undefended case Capel v. Capel and Eames that to many this narrative of it will be dull reading. It is written for the larger public who knew nothing that did not appear in the newspaper, and who wasted such a great deal of unnecessary sympathy on the Petitioner.

THE END.

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